





"I'm sorry," she murmured at last, "I never should have let—
you kiss me like that—"

THIS WOMAN

BY
HOWARD ROCKEY ✓

Frontispiece by
P. J. MONAHAN ✓

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TO MY MEMORIES OF
H. E. O.

THIS WOMAN

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BOOK ONE

I.

SITTING in the shadow of the trees, on a bench in Central Park, Carol Drayton watched a taxi skim by. The faint white of an arc light silhouetted two figures—ardently embracing.

Other motors streamed past. Pet Pekinese sneered from their perches beside liveried chauffeurs . . . pert, painted faces and haughty, enamelled features peered from fleeting limousines . . . bored, affluent brokers, “bookies,” bootleggers and business men, relaxed in their cars and scanned the evening extras . . . débutantes and dazzling dowagers, fur-swathed and overjeweled, puffed perfumed cigarettes and chatted languidly *en route* from tea to *toilette*—and thence to dinner.

Picking up speed—as though impatient to reach a rendezvous—a roadster shot ahead—roadhouse bound. The youth at the wheel wore a polo coat and a vacuously sensual expression. By his side, a girl cuddled closely, her scanty skirt swept to her lap by the chill breeze, revealing a shapely expanse of silken sheerness. She did not seem cold; her manner belied it.

Across Fifty-ninth Street, the towering white façade of the Plaza—myriad lights that twinkled before *porte cochères* and club and apartment windows. Looking on, from its pedestal, the statue of Sherman—its bronze veneered with gilt to harmonize with the polished brass of Manhattan. Trolley cars clanged, horns honked—raucously, needlessly—and police whistles demanded order from threatening traffic chaos. Side-

walks were black with pedestrians hastening to subway and elevated. None of them were Samaritans—although many were Semitic—and none paused to consider Carol.

The passing panorama confirmed the girl's half-formed conclusion. Personifying power—suggesting successful strife and flinty-hearted achievement—the picture was sordid despite its outward pomp. The grinding of motor brakes suggested a grim ruthlessness scarcely masked by the smugness on the features of those who rode. Weariness—born of grinding and grasping—dogged the dejected footsteps of those who walked—or, thanks to "The Friend of the Peepul," suffocated in a hot, disgusting crush as they clung to swaying straps, in exchange for a lowly nickel. Carol recalled that even the fall of a sparrow does not pass unnoticed. Yet, in New York, the fall of the mighty causes no ripple of comment. And Carol was less than the dust beneath the juggernaut wheels.

There seemed but two avenues of escape from her dilemma. Neither appealed to her as alluring. One led by the path which is blazed by brilliant lights—which only go out when the Cinderellas go home . . . when the fairy princes have won their prizes—or else have been stridently laughed at for their pains. The reflection of its signs tinted the sky where Broadway beckoned to her from the west—tinted it red, and streaked it with *yellow*. The other road to to-morrow trailed through a leafy lane—down into damp dells and over little bridges—a road like that of life—leading out of it. That route would take her to the spot where foot and bridle paths meet by the reservoir. One might gallop or saunter to its end.

Over against Central Park West, there were cosy apartments. Women whose well-kept appearance betokened leisure and luxury dwelt there—intermittently—and then an agent's sign "To Sublet" would hang before one. With dubiously envious curiosity, Carol

wondered whether happiness *was* housed within—whether bluebirds nested with peacocks and birds of paradise who consorted with hawks. Greeks, Jews, Christians—the mighty of the medley that is Manhattan, came to them bearing gifts. Carol was not so certain that the motors which left in the night (but never by day) did not leave anguish behind. Further uptown—and downtown, too—the same little game was played—but with much less ostentation.

Slowly, Carol shook her head. Although of the genus moth, she felt no lure of the candle. It was already gutted for her. She had heard that New York forgets in a day—and she had been gone for a month—but Carol knew that she would never forget New York—never cease to loathe and fear the monster which lurked there. Familiar with its aspect, she had no desire to feel its embrace—and her pity was even less than that of the monster's for her.

The month just passed had proved an eternity . . . a nightmare of ignomy during which her soul had been stifled beyond hope of resuscitation. She could not even barter it now with the slightest semblance of honesty. . . . It was shopworn. She had not given in passion—nor in the market place—yet the thing which women prize, and for which men spend treasure, had been snatched from her in the night . . . uncoveted . . . unenjoyed . . . ununderstood . . . unfairly!

Thirty days may be short enough in the scheme of eternal existence, and is often all too brief when the tune is gay, but the month that Carol had just endured had blotted out the pleasures of her pleasant past and blackened all her hopes of a rosy future—irrevocably.

She was hungry—physically and spiritually. But her spirit was doomed to starve; and as for a mere meal—the thought conjured up cafés—jazz—Jezebels. What she longed for was peace—but not at any price. And now—with a sigh—she found herself too tired to fight.

She watched those who were only tired from toil—hurrying homeward—and envied them. Along the path came a girl and a smiling young man, unconscious of her uncurious gaze. In the ecstasy of recent betrothal, they were planning a Castle in Harlem, where the rents were not yet as high as their hopes of married bliss. He kissed her, unaware, or else not caring, whether or not they were watched. The girl repaid the caress of his eager lips with a wantonness that was chaste—fervently trusting. Then they were gone—perhaps to a cheap table d'hôte . . . later to visit a movie—where virtue always triumphs and only censored sin is melodramatically vile.

As their whispering footsteps died away, Carol wondered why she had not remained to face her failure abroad. Especially since there had been no need to return. Poor, optimistic Aunt Margaret's self-denial had financed her niece's studies. Carol's lessons had enriched incompetent and unscrupulous tutors and impoverished the innocent pupil's only relative. Then, when the old lady's death had cut off the revenue, Carol's last greedy instructor discovered her voice to be lacking in volume and in tone. "A waste of time" was his verdict—arrived at since she had no more francs to pay. Humiliated and tearful, her ambition crushed, Carol spent the last of her nest egg for passage. Landing where Liberty mocked her in the greater sense of freedom, the girl wondered whether, after all, Lazonetti had not been right.

Abashed and alone in New York, she pondered over it all. Paying fees in Paris to be taught to sing, and earning fees for singing in cold, callous Manhattan were different matters she learned. Each day brought fresh experience . . . greater anguish . . . deeper disappointment. Weeks of "walking the weary," in and about Times Square, taught her that voice does not matter so much as the turn of an ankle . . . and a tractable turn of mind. There were those, of course,

who succeeded by virtue of talent alone . . . and then there were those whose talents had but little virtue.

Carol's ability proved somewhat above the average, but her adaptability was much below par. One or two opportunities knocked at her door, with offers of marriages slightly morganatic; but while she earnestly longed to sing, she was not by nature a siren. Although born in the West, she was not a miner's daughter. So, since she could not dance the new syncopated steps, and because she failed to recognize Pluto as Plato, Carol found many anterooms quite discouragingly cold. The try-out knickers and cotton stockings she wore at rehearsal halls revealed the fact that her contours were beyond reproach. That her conduct was likewise, proved a detriment. Kindly, disinterested gentlemen who asked her to luncheons and dinners, frankly told her so. And the henchmen of various managers explained with sarcastic candor, that the chorus and the cabarets were not Chautauqua circuits.

Now a policeman sauntered along and surveyed her inquiringly. Her modestly well-tailored suit, and her lack of immodest manner, satisfied his official scrutiny. Swinging his club, he passed on. Yet that brief ordeal made her tremble. Tears welled from her eyes and she sighed when she was relieved of his steady appraising gaze.

Then came a young man in evening clothes, whose gaze, like his gait, was not steady. Obviously, he had come up for air between dubious dives. Wherever he was navigating, his top coat was thrown open, and Carol heard him humming a sprightly song. It fell upon her ears shockingly—not alone because she knew that its words were naughty—but because it was reminiscent of a reeking restaurant, and an interrupted meal of haunting memory. *Had* it been but a month ago?

Searchingly, yet covertly, she stared at the man. Under the arc lights, his temples were gray, despite his

youthful features, and his step would have been swinging, but for his condition. His clothes were well cut, and from his manner she knew that he had been to the cellar born. There was nothing hypocritical nor secretive about this exhibition of indulgence in forbidden personal freedom. He was drunk—ingloriously so—and he gloried in the fact. No, he was not as old . . . not at all the type of man her memory associated with the song which he ceased abruptly as he came abreast of her. Swaying slightly, he paused, slipped his stick under his arm, and fished for a cigarette. His case clattered to the pavement, and for several seconds he fumbled, trying to pick it up. His balance was precarious, but he steadied himself with an effort . . . deliberate . . . determined. Carol looked away . . . held her breath uneasily . . . grew keenly conscious of an alcoholic aroma . . . then covertly watched the man as he groped about the soles of her suede pumps . . . feeling the ground . . . forgetting for what he was searching.

“Sorry!” he muttered thickly . . . now conscious of the girl. “Better strike a match . . .”

“I’ll get it,” Carol offered, and stooping, recovered the thin gold container. Foolish, perhaps, to speak to him, yet she pitied the fellow—wished him away, although she feared that he *must* sit down. If he stayed she must move . . . and she did not wish to go as yet. There was so much to be decided . . . and yet so little. “Here it is!” She drew back her hand as he took the case—like a child who fears to feed an animal.

“Thanks—so much!” he muttered. Then, quite to himself . . . “Late now . . . Cocktails’ll all be gone . . . Dominie’ll be there . . . Terrible bore . . . well meaning old ass . . . Thanks. . . .” He seemed to recall Carol again. His topper was raised with ridiculous courtesy, and with painstaking precision he headed away from her.

Carol felt relieved. It was growing colder. There were heavier things in the hall room she had left a month ago . . . yet she dared not go back to the shadow of Washington Arch. Her clothes would be locked in her trunk, awaiting her claim upon payment of past due rental. There, too, were trinkets she prized—and a perfectly good leather bound book containing oodles of checks—but she had no funds in the bank. In her handbag nestled five dollars . . . not even a cent of change . . . so the redemption of her belongings was quite impossible . . . as unlikely as the chance of her own redemption.

More motors were passing and the girl grew conscious of the passage of time.

Most of the cars were headed southward now—theater or opera bound. The thought of their destinations made her smile. The smile was bitter though, and only her sense of humor kept her from screaming. She thought of Paris—of Lazonetti—of the folly of her efforts. Joy had become a joke—hope a haunting memory. Yet these passing patrons in limousines were going to hear *some one* sing—at the opera! That was amusing—ironic that she should be sitting there watching folks who might have been speeding to listen to her—*might have been!* Still, New York might read of her in the morning after all—not in the critical columns . . . just a tiny note it was true . . . in the column of Persons Missing . . . Would they head it SUICIDE IN CENTRAL PARK, or FOUL PLAY SUSPECTED? At least they would say she was beautiful . . . a Society Girl, no doubt . . . such accounts always did.

Or perhaps she would never be missed and never mentioned. That might be better.

But hunger reasserted itself. She had read that those about to die always ate a hearty meal—in prisons. The thought caused her to cringe. Her slender capital would more than pay for a nourishing dinner—

yet she dared not enter a place where food was served. Not that the waiters would know or think it strange . . . no one was searching for her . . . yet she felt that she must betray herself at the very sight of a menu! If there should be music—or if she glimpsed a flask——!

But the gnawings of Nature called her conscience a coward. Perhaps if she did taste something warm and sipped a cup of tea, she might think more clearly. She needed to think—yet shrank from trying. But with sudden resolution she arose. Then, as she hastily looked about upon the bench and the ground, a pitiful exclamation broke from her lips. Just a moment ago it had been there, she was sure . . . now it was gone! The policeman was returning.

“Lost something, lady?” he inquired, and she wondered whether he had seen her speak to the man in evening clothes.

“My purse!” she managed to answer, trembling.

He searched perfunctorily. “Nobody sitting here beside you?”

“Oh, no!” she denied hastily, in alarm. She was sure he had seen her restore the cigarette case . . . that the bluecoat was suspicious. “There’s been . . . no one at all . . . besides, it doesn’t matter!”

But it did—not merely because of the missing money—and she became panic-stricken—wondering what she should do. She wanted that slip of paper in her bag.

II.

GRAMERCY BLEEKER pushed on with dogged determination.

It was damned dark . . . lamps made him think of London—fogged. He couldn't light his cigarette . . . too windy. Oh, well! That girl *was* rather good looking . . . nice sort of girl . . . kind kid . . . a bit well dressed, too . . . or *was* she? Hadn't noticed particularly . . . only her ankle. . . . Fair enough! Sometimes the ones with the shapeliest curves were straight! Not bad that . . . rather clever. . . . Must remember it.

Funny noise . . . like a lion roaring. Couldn't be . . . but of course, it was . . . in the Zoo, naturally. Stupid not to think of that . . . elephants, tigers and things . . . right across the street from all the social lions . . . some of 'em damned unsociable . . . bounders!

At times the forest seemed an impenetrable maze of trees, with turns which kept leading one back to the starting point . . . fatiguing going . . . too many hills and vales. Should have taken a taxi. But at last persistence won. Always would! He was at the exit—just below the old Arsenal—and there was Fifth Avenue! Good old street. Some *via*! Nothing like it in the world!

A little gratefully, he leaned against the low stone wall. The signs on those lampposts told him, hazily, that he had arrived at the proper Sixty cross-street . . . unless that three was an eight . . . or the eight was a three. Both indistinct.

For a brief interval he studied the kaleidoscopic lights of the ever-present traffic. That was a bus . . .

people upstairs. It rumbled by . . . swerving skid-dishly. Bleeker dodged a south-bound touring car and essayed the oily asphalt, zig-zaggedly gaining the opposite curb.

"Carry on, old dear!" he spurred himself stoically, then paused for orientation on the east pavement. "Mush be Park Av'nue jush 'head. Lesh go!"

Bleeker arrived—in time for cocktails—and in season to make an early fool of himself.

An ebony attendant grinned . . . the lift made him dizzy . . . damn nonsense! His entrance was almost a blank, but it was the cue for chiding. Rot! He was all right! Pleasant sort of confusion . . . too hot . . . stuffy! Aline was a maid of the mist—a froth of green and silver spray . . . little sparkling things, like fireflies, danced in her hair. Stockings seemed too human to be fabric . . . might be flesh . . . girls didn't wear 'em sometimes . . . might have forgotten to put 'em on. She looked good enough to drink . . . cool . . . inviting . . . kissable . . . then quenching—as she glared at him. He didn't get that . . . then he did.

Well, she needn't get sore about it!

That black figure was perplexing . . . must be the Rector . . . but it wasn't . . . that V was Mrs. Sturdie's back—turned against him. Hang it! . . . must get a brace on himself. . . . Those orange-blossoms were good. . . . No, another wouldn't hurt him . . . used to 'em. . . .

Why did that fool Judson keep bringing him food? . . . He wasn't hungry . . . just thirsty!

Then it happened.

A shattering of crystal . . . a pious exclamation. . . . an impudent, feminine giggle . . . and his own unsober laugh. "Sorry! Damned stupid of me!" Then Bleeker found himself on the floor. Look't . . . all those legs under the table! He wondered which were which.

Whitney Duane was pulling out one of his arms. The butler yanked the other from its socket. "Oh, say now!" Needn't lift him . . . he didn't need help.

Vaguely, he caught the glint of a monocle, slowly set beneath the busy eyebrows of Baptiste Stratini . . . the man was laughing at him.

"What a wanton, woeful waste!" sighed the Italian, observing the spilled cordial staining the lace of the table cloth.

Mrs. Sturdie would be peevish . . . must apologize . . . what? No, he wouldn't shut up!

"Do gather him together and see him to his car!" He'd heard that tone before—when Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant issued an ultimatum. "My dear Rector—I'm so upset!"

"So's my nice little cordial!" Bleeker mourned. Somebody laughed . . . that fool preacher was sputtering! Then they bundled him out into the hall . . . someone had his hat and coat . . . the door clanged. . . .

"My dear Mrs. R.-S.," the clergyman murmured, as his nephew speeded the parting potted guest. "*Of course* you are upset! Even my own calm is ruffled. And—" he paused to daub at his vestments with a handkerchief—"my cloth is polluted with the abominable odor of unsanctified beverage."

"What a shame!" she sympathized, arching her eyebrows as she glanced toward Baptiste Stratini. "Shall we go into the library?"

The Rector held aside the portières, and sighing deeply, followed her into the softly lighted room, gratefully breathing its pleasant, restful atmosphere.

"And now," the Reverend Gouverneur Duane be-moaned, "I find myself confronted with another disgraceful scandal in the innermost fold of my flock!" He paused to adjust the button at the back of his collar, as though its stiff-starched righteousness choked him.

"But poor Gramercy isn't the only black sheep, you know!" his parishioner defended.

"No, dear shepherdess!" he sighed once more. "And for *your* sake I wish I might overlook the incident. Yet to do so would only be to countenance its repetition. Please do not think I wish to chasten *you*!" he added hastily. "I could not bear to be eternally reproving so charming a member of my congregation."

"I couldn't bear it either!" she replied a little impatiently.

He shook a finger at her . . . a ringed, pudgy one . . . in mock condemnation. "Do you know you are a very wicked woman? It grieves me that your otherwise delightful assemblies are all too often marred by such lamentable exhibitions. Just whiff the horrid redolence of my uniform of office!"

"I'm more than sorry!" she wondered what to do. Then her cameo-like features brightened in a charmingly mischievous smile. "I have it! Whitney has just given Aline the loveliest new scent—*Allure du Diable*—it's all pervading. Let me get the atomizer and spray your——"

"My *dear*!" he protested, raising his hands . . . palms out . . . piously. "It would never do. I might be suspected of even greater indiscretions!" A sly, simpering witticism, half in horror, partly innuendo.

"I hadn't thought of that," confessed his hostess contritely. "But, really—don't you think you're a trifle too exacting? Pleasant people are not all inclined to be prudes these days." Without expecting an answer, since her remark was assertive . . . intended as a gentle rebuke . . . and not intoned as a question . . . she sat down on the davenport. Smiling, with a hint of envy in her expression, she looked up at a portrait above the mantle. From its frame, the plain, pretty features of a Pilgrim maid gazed down upon her descendant . . . without unkindness . . . with no suggestion of criticism in the frankly

friendly eyes. *Her* stout little heart had rebelled against narrow bigotry, and Mrs. R.-S. wondered what she would have thought about the Rector . . . even less tolerant in his way, after the passage of time, than his predecessors . . . thundering the threat of eternal damnation upon the horrified ears of their God-fearing flocks.

The Rector, too, regarded the woman in oils, and then took note of the buckled slipper tapping the fender of the grate. How different was this adorable creature from the one on the wall, with her modest fichu and her prim, plain homespun dress. He contrasted her primitive vanities and emotions with the complicated, sophisticated sensuousness of the woman who sat radiant before him, surrounded by luxuries which set off and accentuated her loveliness . . . alluring to an unholy degree. Especially he was aware of her absence of fichu, of the sheer clingingness of her imported gown, revealing each sinuous line of a figure as lithe as the form of a maid—although the object of his uncovert devotion was a widowed matron.

Despite an effort to put it from his mind, he recalled an early American novel, in which a scarlet woman and a minister of the gospel had figured somewhat disgracefully. The author, a realist of the times of which he penned, had made his classic a powerful picture of the clergyman's temptation . . . a pathetic justification of the woman's weakness . . . and, rather uncomfortably, Doctor Duane grew conscious of the impression that the dominie in question had been a bit of a cad. Yet how multiplied were the pitfalls of the present age! Then, like an actor gone wool-gathering, he recalled his lines and the need of impressing his audience.

"*I wish* our views might harmonize!" he told her earnestly. "Life would then be like wandering through green pastures—where only still waters flow!" He gazed at her enraptured . . . exaltedly ecstatic . . . and he thought of love. Not that degrading, simulated

sentiment conceived in blatant jazz and born in illicit stimulant—but a genuine, spontaneous, all-giving and godly emotion!

But as he observed her indifference . . . her utter lack of response . . . he sighed. This woman was *not* weak. She was strong in her convictions . . . a tower of social strength . . . with a heart impregnable. Yet he meant to be doughty . . . militant and persistent. But he bent his head . . . remembering how vain is vanity . . . how revolting is sin . . . how weak the flesh! Mentally he scourged himself. “If all pleasant people *will* persist in rebelling against the canons of decency and decorum—how *can* I continue to accept your invitations . . . wink at flagrant violations . . . and by my unprotesting presence, appear to condone them?”

“I fully appreciate your position . . . and I regret that you feel ill at ease with my guests . . . even though I cannot fully share your opinions.” She tried not to be needlessly resentful.

“I am glad!” he rubbed his hands together with satisfaction. “There *is* a bond between us—a happy, holy one! Yet you must see that a continuance of my present course would tend to mitigate the force of my shafts against current evils. It would serve to contradict the very words with which I must admonish you all—if my sermons are to be interesting . . . and profitable. . . .”

“Financially?” she murmured absently. “I forgot . . . you always publish them, don’t you? I suppose the papers rather like you to flay us . . . and our poor exposed backs are so bare!”

“You are not serious!” he flushed at her inference of an income from a well-known press syndicate. Then, in an effort to overcome his confusion and establish himself on less dangerous ground: “You even evade the issue.”

“Just as Whitney does when I ask him whether he

buys for his clients the stocks he personally regards as good investments." Purse-proud and avariciously ambitious! She knew how welcome were money-changers in Doctor Duane's temple. She was glad to taunt him with it.

"Save for its practical helpfulness, I abhor finance!" he abjured in his most impressive pulpit manner. "Its principles perplex and vex me. Speculating in futures may be well enough for a broker to urge upon his following . . . but as a clergyman, I cannot well recommend the practice!" That, he thought, would look well in print later on.

"But," she challenged teasingly, enjoying his discomfort, "doesn't your whole preachment urge just that? How can you be sure the investment's sound . . . that the pavements will be of gold and the gates of pearl?"

"Please do not pretend to be literal!" he objected, flustered. "You know I've never been overly militant against the occasional fracture of the original Ten Commandments. As a liberal, tolerant man of understanding and the deepest sympathy, I realize that, *among us*, a few of the Shalt Nots are more or less obsolete . . . should I say in some need of mild revision? Yet transgressions such as we have just witnessed—on the part of an otherwise upright youth—constitute one of the most pernicious of our present problems."

"I really *hate* to serve liquor—especially now that no one thinks of anything else," she said wearily. "Besides it's frightfully expensive—yet what can one do? You've no idea of the cost! My fuel bills used to make me hotter than my furnace . . . now coal is the cheapest thing I put into my cellar."

"But if *you* would take a stand against it . . . refuse . . ." he snatched at a straw.

"I couldn't—largely because you insist that drinking's wicked. You clergymen are conduct barometers.

We flock to hear you in order to know the things we shouldn't do. It's really the only way we can learn what *is* the smart thing *to* do."

"Charming heathen!" he conceded, inwardly confessing that her fight had failed, and hoping to turn away her wrath with flattery. "Your defiant attitude makes you all the more intriguing. . . . Yet, let me say . . ."

"Are you going to try to convert me? It might prove diverting!"

"Perhaps I like you better as you are," he resolved against the effort, and took another tack. "But consider lilies like your daughter—who neither toil nor spin, and yet are arrayed in a manner which would have made Solomon blush! Think of their orgies of extravagance . . . their literally 'silhouette' skirts and even more obvious shortcomings . . . far too intimate dances . . . roof-gardens, roadhouses—kissing in limousines. . . ."

He was working himself into a fanatical frenzy of denunciation when an impudent voice piped up from the doorway.

"Oh, Doctor Duane! Surely you're not asking mother to motor with you? Fie, fie, Mummy!"

With a saucy swish and a shake of her blonde bobbed head, Aline came toward them, prepared to take up the cudgel in defense of her generation. Not that she cared very much what the Rector thought . . . nor anyone else for that matter . . . but just because it wouldn't do to let him get away with any such nonsense as that.

"Really, Doctor Duane," she assumed a defiant air, "if limousines weren't made to kiss in—why ride in 'em? But we won't argue *that*. Kissing's awfully stupid at best—don't you think? I do . . . and I know what I'm talking about! . . . Any girl can make a man *kiss* her . . . the skill lies in getting them to stop!"

"My dear child!" protested the Rector.

"I'm *not!* . . . aren't you glad?" she asked him impudently. "But don't let me intrude. There's Stratti in the music room, and if I don't go in to him he'll pound out something classic on the piano! Oh, Strat-ti!" she called to him through the open door, "I want you to pet me a little—I'm peevish as the devil!" And with an airy wave of her polished finger tips, she flitted from the room and shut them in.

"You *permit* it?" the Rector reproached her mother.

"She only said it to shock you . . . she didn't mean to be rude. . . ."

Again he sighed. "But they will *dance* . . . she and this Stratini . . . a sophisticated man, affiliated with the demoralizing glamor of the operatic stage! He will hold her in his arms . . . in close embrace. . . ."

"Signor Stratini is my friend!" Mrs. R.-S. reminded him icily.

"Forgive me . . . but I am so in earnest! These toddles and cuddles . . . various animal perambulations and more impossible gyrations—call them what terrible names we may—they can but tend to lower the relations of those who indulge in them. I shrink from such close proximity of palpitating bodies . . . from the intoxication of syncopation . . . to say nothing of its illegal and invariable synthetic accompaniment! I assure you, my dear, that to-day's dances are making modern Salomes of our loveliest girls!"

"And Herods of our high school boys?" she deprecated. "Never fear . . . Aline isn't likely to demand your head . . . and I'm sure she won't turn poor Stratini's."

"Perhaps not . . . but you must admit the natural fascination of such a man in the eyes of a romantic girl. He is a genius in his field, who scoffs at my doctrines and makes his slurs amusing. At table this evening, just after I had said grace, I could not help overhearing a wager he made with her. . . . I think it had something to do with my selection of scriptural

verse . . . and the forfeit was a pair of costly silk stockings against a pair of improper pink pajamas!"

"Apparently you don't approve of pajamas," she said, "but are silk stockings a cardinal sin?"

Speculatively, she surveyed her own, and the Rector was not unconscious of their contours, of the high arched instep and the dainty turn of her ankle.

"Not in themselves," he admitted, averting his gaze and toying with the ribbon of his glasses. "But I beg you, listen to that dreadful phonograph . . . an ally of the devil and a potently dangerous one! Your daughter, and a man old enough to be her father. . . ." He paused, finding the phrase unfortunate in its suggestion. "A man of whom I can hardly fully approve," he went on, "is treading with her, abandoned measures once confined to the underworld . . . to dives and dens of iniquity . . . and now it invades the sanctity of *your* home! Consider—instead of such an association, suppose Aline were to come under the kindly, spiritual guidance of a man. . . ."

"Of your own temperament?"

"You have guessed my secret!" He stepped nearer, embarrassed, pompous . . . awkwardly eager.

"Don't be absurd!" she stopped him, not unkindly. "I'm much too old to *dream* of . . . of such things as love . . . or marriage."

"In the flower of your beauty!" he contradicted, with the fulsome gallantry of a bygone age which placed women upon a pedestal that even denied them legs. "Yet before I presume to plead my own cause, I wished to discuss with you the possible alliance between Aline and my nephew . . . an ideal union in so many ways! Wealth . . . intrenched social position . . . and the impregnable fortress of religious prestige. What more could young people ask?"

"Love . . . and a certain amount of liberty, perhaps," she answered dryly. "Don't misunderstand. I like Whitney . . . because he is human . . . he would

neither bore Aline to death nor drive her to distraction by having senseless affairs with other and *otherwise* women. Yet I am not convinced that they care for each other . . . maritally. Nor am I certain that such a marriage would be wise. Just as you and I disagree . . . in some measure . . . Aline reflects *my* attitude. She might not make Whitney the type of wife of which *you* could conscientiously approve."

"Oh, really!" he disclaimed. "You must not imagine that I mean to criticize *you*! Your very paganism makes me adore you all the more. . . ."

A noise behind him caused his ardor to wilt, and the Rector stiffened abruptly, trusting that his remark had not been overheard . . . that it might not be misconstrued. Then something collided with him and he nearly lost his balance. Toddling into the library from the music room, Aline and Stratini, entwined in the Cleopatra Clinch, had run him down unobserved . . . in the preoccupation of their propinquity.

"Oh, Stratti!" Aline cried out with affected alarm, as her eyes sparkled elfinly, "The Doctor's all red and puffy. . . . I'm afraid he's going to faint!"

"I'll get Judson to fetch some brandy," suggested Stratini, maliciously good-natured mischief in his tone.

"Stratti, *please!*" begged Mrs. R.-S. with amusedly indulgent disapproval. She hated scenes, and she dreaded a clash between the two, the inevitable brief battle in which Stratini's sarcastic fire was all too likely to scorch the Rector's flapping wings.

"Not for *me*, sir!" scowled the incensed little man, as he brushed a smudge of powder from Aline's bare shoulder off the sleeve of his coat, in speechless exasperation.

"But if you are *ill*?" Stratini persisted, solicitously mocking.

"You know that I need no *liquor!*" the Rector found his tongue, "and also that I do not approve of its use!"

Stratini shrugged as though perplexed. "But the

Master evidently did," he said. "You recall His turning water into wine. . . ."

"A most unfortunate passage . . . no doubt garbled in translation . . . and which might be well expurgated from the Script!" snapped Doctor Duane. "In any event, I have always considered it the needful to be suppressed account of Christ's most ill-advised act!"

"My *God!*" gasped Stratini.

"But I must be going," the Rector announced haughtily, consulting his watch. "I am shortly due to address a gathering of good people who are zealously striving to dispel the clouds of distressing darkness which surround us and bathe our poor world in the light of a more perfect day. I wonder if my car has arrived. . . ."

Mrs. R.-S. rang for Judson, and Stratini, still chuckling softly, reached into his pocket for his wallet. "Before you go," he detained the Rector, "let me show you a little stanza I copied from an old sampler . . . a prized antique possession of our good friend the Bishop——"

"Bishop Rhinebeck?" queried the clergyman, reaching blindly for his pince-nez, as though doubting his ears and fearfully dreading lest Stratini should produce some bit of *risqué* or sacrilegious verse.

Stratini nodded. "The sampler is framed on the wall of his study," he explained. "I copied it off the other evening while we were playing bridge . . ."

"The *Bishop!*" repeated Doctor Duane, with emphasized incredulity, yet hardly venturing to censure the act of his immediate chief.

"A most interesting and illuminating bit of embroidery, more than a hundred years old," Stratini said as he unfolded the written copy. "It was worked by the needle of a tiny girl . . . at the age when a child should believe that all the world is a garden where fairies play. Yet conceive of the type of mind that could teach a child this idea of God:

"Religion should our thoughts engage
Amid our youthful bloom—
'Twill fit us for declining age—
And for the awful tomb!"

For a moment there was silence. Then Stratini said, "Think of it! Baby hands sewed that sentiment into homely fabric! No wonder men and women *feared* the Lord!"

"You can't be serious!" Aline refused to believe it. "Surely children were never told such dreadful things!"

"They were—really," Stratini assured her. "The Bishop preserves the sampler as a horrible example . . . to hold up before naughty flappers who grow restive under the mild restrictions he gently imposes upon those whose happiness and welfare are his sole objects in life."

"The Bishop's a lamb . . . an old dear!" Aline enthused. "He's so nice himself that I almost want to be good . . . just so's to please him."

"But beware, painted hoyden, with your wicked wiles and your baby smile!" Stratini warned her in sepulchral tones, "the awful tomb yawns, yet you jazz along, steeped in sin and iniquity, toward this gloomy goal!"

"'Oh, death, where is thy sting?'" quoted the horrified Rector. "The grave has no terrors for the righteous."

"You make me wonder," Stratini said. "How terrible heaven would be without little Aline to make faces at all the angels and get the goats of the Saints!"

But the clergyman ignored him, and tenderly turned to his hostess. "Good-night, dear lady," he murmured. "May I leave with you just one thought? . . ."

"A penny for yours!" Stratini whispered to Aline.

"Piker!" she charged contemptuously. "They're really beyond price."

"Good-night, my child . . . and God bless you," the Rector beamed upon her and she made a little curtsy, revealing her rolled-down stockings.

"To you, Signor Stratini . . . *adieu!*"

"*Bon voyage!*" Stratini waved to him in Chautauqua pantomime. "When we sail with Charon, I fear our routes will not be the same . . . since the Lord is merciful," he added, to Aline, as the ruffled pouter pigeon, with pompous dignity, took his hat and stick from Judson and stalked from the room.

III.

"THE man is inconceivable!" exploded Stratini, goaded beyond all patience and polite restraint. "He proclaims himself a soldier of the Church—and, paradoxically enough—I somehow believe him sincere . . . but almost in the same breath, he presumes to criticize his commander—to find fault with his chosen hero!"

"A mere matter of rhetoric," Mrs. R.-S. reminded him. "You take him too seriously."

"How else *am* I to take him?" demanded Stratini. "It is the whole trouble. We are given laws—scriptural and temporal—so absurd that we laugh at them. They are worse than none. If we *are* socially and morally sick it is because we have too many doctors . . . too many meddlers . . . and meddling has grown to be as profitable as bootlegging. This fellow Duane is a braying, hypocritical ass whose sermons are more salacious by far than the vapid motion pictures our righteous morons condemn! Not that I mean to defend the saccharine sex muck of the screen!"

"Stratti," Aline broke in, preening herself before him with exaggeratedly seductive movement, "don't you think I'd make a perfectly scrumptuous vamp?"

"There you have it!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Our bigoted friend has suggested a new diversion to her . . . I heard his tirade during the cocktail hour. What else can one expect? Until this no-more-cakes-and-ale Blue Law group develops some constructive criticism, the situation will remain intolerable . . . the problem unsolved. The whole psychology of such fanatics is absurd. They tear down without building up . . . take everything away without proposing anything in return. . . ."

"Oh, *do* stop moralizing and give me a cigarette!"

Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant sighed wearily. "The Rector's denunciations are monotonous enough; but even your scintillating defense of immorality and license grows tiresome at times."

"Pardon me," he smiled. "Descended from a Medici Pope, I'm reverting to type." He held a match for her . . . then selected an Egyptian as though the eight in his case were not as alike as proverbial peas . . . fitted it into his holder, and thoughtfully lit it.

"Well?" Aline leaned over the back of the davenport, impudently bewitching. "Aren't you going to offer *me* one?"

Stratini started . . . absently . . . apparently about to further pillory the departed preacher . . . then, emerging from his meditations, he raised his eyebrows, provocatively, pretending to consult her mother. "Is the child old enough, Eleanore?"

"She makes *me* feel very old at times! By all means give her one of yours or she'll be raiding my own pet supply."

Aline struck a match on the turned sole of her slipper . . . inhaled deeply, and blew a cloud of smoke defiantly at Stratini, taunting him affectionately beneath lowered lashes. She contemplated him with a mock air of adolescent horror. "So your influence is pernicious, is it? . . . your philosophy deplorable . . . your example damnable . . . your every thought and gesture contaminatingly immoral! Oh, Mummy—*save* me from this beautifully terrible man!"

"Some obsolete customs, alas, are no longer in vogue!" lamented Stratini. "You ought to be taken out to the woodshed——"

"Oooh! *Stratti!*" she dropped her eyes demurely. "It wouldn't be proper!" And she pulled down her shimmery skirt, covering her knee . . . only to burst into a peal of laughter and dart to the door expectantly. "There's Whitney back! . . . Get Bleeker home unspilled?"

"Safely parked for the night—I hope!" was the cheery response from the foyer hall. "Insisted that he was a gold-fish and wanted to go for a swim in a flowing bowl."

"Well, don't come in here!" Aline warned. "I'll come to you—you may not be sober . . . besides, Mummy and Stratti are busy—ogling each other, and panning your sanctimonious uncle . . . aren't you, old dears?" . . . Her laughter trailed after her down the passage, echoed by the sound of the kiss with which she greeted Whitney. . . .

. . . "What *is* there to do about it—if anything?" Mrs. R.-S. importuned, as Stratini settled himself in an overstuffed chair and drew a tabouret toward its arm. "Distractingly brazen . . . yet beneath that good outside, she *can't* be bad, Baptiste!"

Stratini nodded, agreeing. "Nowadays one only finds Foolish Virgins in the Bible. They're extinct . . . modern ones never slumber . . . seldom sleep . . . aren't caught napping while the Bridegroom tarries to toddle *en route*. It is you, and I—and the Rector—who are foolish! How can we expect Aline to weigh values? At the same dinner, she is confronted with a drunken youth and a dogmatic bore . . . both *your* guests. Doctor Duane makes the thought of abstemiousness obnoxious. Gramercy's *contretemps* caused laughter instead of disgust at his intoxication. The Rector's continual carping becomes insufferable . . . such drivel drives us to folly from sheer *ennui*. Elea-nore, women wouldn't even dream of half the world's wickedness if this man Duane didn't constantly warn them against it . . . I mean it. . . . His condemnation of the most innocent vices serves to hold up serious sin as a blessed relief. . . . His righteous fingers point the shortest and pleasantest route to damnation, and his urge is far more compelling than the smiles of the seven sirens who sit and smile on the rim of hell."

Mrs. R.-S. laughed, unamused. "I, too, could be

bitter, were it not for my natural responsibility. I am quite capable of conducting myself as I see fit; but Stratti, I sometimes wonder whether I surround the girl with proper influences."

"Influences!" snorted Stratini. "We're *entirely* surrounded by them. They're confusing. The Bishop's interpretation makes me really love religion . . . as I would adore any beautiful, exquisite, desirable thing which promotes content—happiness. . . . I find peace in it . . . and pleasure . . . a sense of well-being. I could rejoice in an eternity spent in the inferno, chatting with Bishop Rhinebeck. If it were not impossible to die after death, I should expire if I had to dangle my heels from a cloud and listen forever to the distressing discords the Rector would pluck from his harp."

"But remember, Stratti, . . . Aline is a girl . . . a very young girl! . . . and virtue in a woman . . ."

"Is all too often its own reward . . . unhonored and unsung. . . . Yet virtue is various . . . frequently half-baked . . . often overdone . . . a great deal depends upon what we really mean by virtue. Whatever it is, you need have no fears for Aline . . . flesh of your flesh . . . image of your body, and your mind . . . for at heart, my dear, you are a purist."

"I wonder!"

"Why? I *know* it. Aline, too, will like those things which cultivated people enjoy, and she will shun the shams and the senseless sophistries we reject."

"But can you understand what a mother feels . . . and suffers . . . ?"

"I must admit that I have never given birth to a child . . . nor have I as yet endured the exquisite torture of matrimony . . . yet blasphemous though I am branded, by our Jesuitical neighbor, I wonder whether I might not give Aline more practical counsel than he . . . or even you. The fearsome vice monster has nothing in his little bag of tricks that is not all too obvious to me. There are no illusions. . . . I know

the answer . . . torn from the back of the book which the Rector never read."

"You've been through the mill—Aline is still grist!" she reminded him apprehensively. "Perhaps she has too *much* freedom . . . too much motoring, dancing . . . drinking. . . ."

"Bah!" . . . he drained his highball. . . . "Volstead vices are vile, I admit . . . but these, my dear, have been brought about by reform . . . what we may not have in the home or in public places, we seek secretly—at the sign of the blind pig. Yet limousines are not essentially licentious . . . *you* ride in them . . . so does the Rector, fawning upon the most voluptuous ladies of his congregation. Nor need roadhouses be ruinous . . . some of them are pleasantly prosaic . . . dancing, too, may be inspiring—save to sordid souls."

"But constant familiarity . . . you know the old adage. . . ."

"Like most—a pretty phrasing of an absurd superstition . . . yet in a measure true, so long as vice remains mysterious. Suppressed curiosity has bred scarlet hoydens since time immemorial . . . modern frankness is the safeguard of the genus flapper. I tell you that if a girl of our day goes 'wrong,' as the subtitles have it, she does so with eyes wide open . . . because she *wants* to . . . whether for profit or pleasure . . . and the sensational slime-slingers who pollute our pulpits and constitute themselves the devil's press-agents, only urge them on!"

"Are you quite fair, Stratti?" she searched for the soundness of his accusation. "I'm not altogether sure I agree. Despite the drab dreariness of the Rector's picture, its basic common sense almost persuades me to leave undone the things I shouldn't do. Then you, on the other hand, make me blush for the things I instinctively feel I *should* do."

"Well?" he challenged. "What more natural? . . .

We long for the jam pots and want them all the more when we're told we mustn't taste them . . . yet I believe that morality's largely a matter of mind . . . a point of view. If we're honest with ourselves, we shun harmful habits . . . but sometimes sauce for the goose is poison for the gander."

"How can one decide then?" she asked facetiously. "Faced with the choice of two evils, I shall probably adopt a middle course that will make me ineligible for either conventional hereafter."

His face lit up. "An unknown eternity . . . a private paradise!" He kissed his finger tips to her exotically. "What a delightful adventure! . . . perhaps alone—together, of course—for whither thou goest I go, and thy hades shall be my hades."

"Is the Scotch making you eloquent?"

"I hope not. I hate eloquence."

They fell into the silence of contented understanding. She dropped her cigarette into an ash tray, and Stratini, relaxing, stretched out his long legs, toyed with the cord of his monocle, and rested his finely poised head against the back of the chair . . . staring at the ceiling . . . imagining murals which pleased him utterly. Approving their mood, the mantle clock ticked pleasantly . . . even the ukulele monstrosity, to which Aline and Whitney were presumably gliding, failed to disturb his peace of mind . . . or to rouse Eleanore from her reverie. . . . Restraint was forgotten . . . restfulness reigned in the library.

Gradually Stratini grew conscious of a strong yet subtle fascination, a soothing, sensuous cognizance of something which prompted him to click his cigarette-holder in four-four time, against the rim of his tall glass, in which only melting ice remained, destitute of the vestige of bonny beverage. . . . Was it only a pleasing, haunting memory, drifting back over years, or did he really hear a mellifluous melody, softly calling . . . increasingly intriguing?

His tapping stopped . . . the impression remained . . . audibly now.

"What record is that?" . . . absently . . . skeptically . . . incredibly.

"Carmen, stupid!" . . . The guiding genius of the Opera asking that!

"But of course! . . . Who *sings* it?" . . . This irritably . . . unconvinced of reality.

A noncommittal, inconsequent shrug of shapely shoulders . . . then Eleanore, too, listened, spell-bound. Exquisitely, the notes of the *Habanera* drifted to them on the stillness . . . drowned out by a passing taxi in Park Avenue, five stories below . . . clear again, and sweeter now . . . conjuring recollections of Calvé and Farrar . . . of flashing eyes and tapping heels . . . and then Mrs. R.-S.'s satin toe beat time against the fender, as Stratini's manicured nails accompanied the air in the cadence of castanets.

"*Who* sings like that?" he sprang up in eager enthusiasm. "It is no record . . . it is real . . . human . . . a voice! . . . Great God—*what* a voice! . . ." Half across the room he paused, a hand to his ear, thrilled to the depths of his musical soul. "Crude," he appraised in a murmur, yet undiscouraged. "Soulful . . . somehow true! Ah, what tone! . . . Immeasurable in potentiality."

Abruptly the song ceased—unfinished . . . and the door of the music room flew open with a bang . . . Aline, all aflutter, appearing on the threshold. . . .

"She fainted!"

"Who fainted!" Stratini thundered . . . as though nothing else was of consequence . . . as if he had been affronted unpardonably. . . .

"The girl outside. . . . We were listening. . . . Whitney threw her a coin . . . she swayed, tried to catch it, nodding her thanks to us . . . and then fell backwards. . . ."

"*Imbeciles!*" . . . With a bound he reached the

French window, and flinging it open stepped out upon a small stone balcony, overlooking the carriageway, with its stunted, boxed trees and miniature lawn, flanking a sparkling fountain. . . . In the light of the white globes arranged like candelabrum before the imposing entrance of the towering apartment, he caught a glimpse of the pale face of a girl. . . . Aline, her mother and Whitney . . . crowding at his shoulder, staring down at the crescent of paved driveway . . . all talking . . . all speculating . . . *doing* nothing! Inaction infuriated him. Had the world lost its wits?

A liveried doorman lifted the limp form from the shallow pool. . . . "Poor thing!" Aline pitied her, "she is soaked to the skin!"

"*Maledetto!*" Stratini stormed, and literally tore at his hair. Brushed back, iron-gray, it made him *distingué* until disorder transformed him into a pirate. Only careful grooming caged the tempestuous Sicilian within and presented a suave exterior to civilization. "She will take cold! . . . Fool! . . . Pig! . . . Spawn of a thick-headed aborigine!" . . . His voice roared down into the cavernous court, accentuated by its resonant acoustics. . . .

. . . Occupants of adjoining apartments, above and below, peered from the windows of seventeen-room-and-four-bath suites, with mingled emotions of mild annoyance or passing curiosity . . . slender men, smug men, stunning women; domestics . . . disheveled males in dressing gowns, termagants, absurd in elaborate peignoirs . . . Ethiopian keepers of the gate, gold-laced . . . grinning . . . officially outraged at the intrusion of the girl, grew servile as they gaped upward in amazement . . . misconstruing Stratini's rage, and hastily helping a chauffeur to gather up scattered silver, carelessly tossed to the singer in contemptuous, unappreciative charity, they none too gently bade her begone.

"Spawn of ten thousand devils!" the impresario de-

nounced their zealous stupidity, and in his convulsive gesticulation, his fingers closed on Aline's arm in a bruising clutch. The elaborate chasing of his signet ring lacerated her flesh. . . . Stratini, unconscious of it, groaned. "They handle a delicate instrument like some sack of dross!" He lost all control of himself . . . the pirate predominated, and his polished veneer vanished.

"Great God of Intolerance!" he roared in a frenzy of gesticulation. "These eunuchs of plutocratic purity drive her off like some gin-jaded, screeching sot of the street! Stop it, I tell you! Stand still until I come! . . ."

. . . "You're hurting me!" Aline cried out and drew away in pain. . . .

"Hurting; *hell!*" He hardly heard her as he thrust her roughly aside to shake his fist at a puzzled policeman who hastened to the scene below. . . . "Hi! Hi! Gendarme! . . . hold her carefully . . . so much as bruise her flesh and I'll have you broken! . . . Wait! . . . I am coming, thou great nizzies! . . . It is *Stratini* speaking!" . . .

Then, brushing past Aline and Mrs. R.-S., thrusting Whitney aside with a shove of his elbow, this tartar, gone insane, dashed through the library and disappeared . . . leaving the trio to gasp at the voluble burst of picturesque profanity which marked his abrupt departure.

IV.

"WEAKNESS—probably hunger," Stratini diagnosed as they placed the girl gently upon the davenport before the fire in the library. Mrs. R.-S. was arranging the cushions beneath her head, while Whitney Duane stood by, fascinated by the play of the flames on her features, his presence quite as helplessly useless as that of a beach party chaperone. Aline, eager but ignorant of what she should do, stood excitedly near with a water glass in her hand. The sight of it was too much for Stratini's patience, and with a sweep of his fist, he knocked the goblet to the hearth, where it smashed in a thousand pieces.

"Brandy!" he prescribed brusquely, "and more air! . . . Do you wish to stifle her?"

Resignedly contemptuous, the inhumanly dignified Judson effaced himself in the direction of his pantry, and Mrs. R.-S. placed a restraining hand upon Stratini's sleeve. "You'll frighten her, you great bear!" she warned; "she's regaining consciousness . . . and you're acting like a brigand who's abducted an heiress."

Reproved, amused, yet nervously restive, he stepped aside and let her slip her arm about the prostrate girl. . . . Wearily, Carol Drayton opened her eyes and saw them all in a misty unreality of pathetic bewilderment. . . . Dazed, and a little timid, she remembered the policeman, and felt relieved at his evident absence. . . . The cushions were soft and agreeable, easing her tired body and her splitting head, but it worried her that her sodden shoes and wet, frumpled frock, were staining the tapestry. . . . Water, in a cold little stream, was running down her neck. . . .

"I'm sorry," she managed to murmur faintly, "I

didn't *mean* to trouble you . . . but I'm better . . . lots better . . . and I must go. . . ."

"Where?" Mrs. R.-S. asked doubtfully, solicitously.

"To nowhere, I think," Carol smiled wanly, "just away from here . . . anywhere. . . ."

"Not until I hear you sing again!" Stratini's basso crashed upon her ears, and she shrank from the fire which flashed from his eyes. . . . "Please!" he modified his imperative desire, modulating his tone.

"I—I couldn't . . ." trembling . . . on the verge of tears. . . .

"Never mind—another time, perhaps . . . if you feel like it," Mrs. R.-S. soothed, petting her hand. . . .

"You really can't leave just yet. . . . Try not to worry . . . and tell me your name."

"Does it matter?" It *couldn't* . . . she dared not take the risk of telling them.

"Of course it matters!" Stratini stentored. . . .

"What shall I call you except a little fool . . . a *great* fool, perhaps? . . . How can I make a nameless nobody the talk of the musical world?"

The tears flooded from beneath her damp lashes, but hurt resentment dried them as fire flashed from her eyes . . . and Stratini smiled . . . he liked that spirit.

"It's not fair to make fun of me . . . you wouldn't if you understood. . . ."

"Do you think I never knew adversity?" he deprecated. "Suffering and singing are correlated—like trials and triumphs. . . . I do not sing . . . yet I am constantly pained by proxy, through association with those who do. . . ."

"I tried!" she flung at him, extenuating her sense of failure. "When I went to Europe to study. . . ."

"Ah! Then you *have* studied?" . . . his manner was almost menacing . . . the mood of a father who fears some irreparable injury has been done to his child. . . . "Under what charlatans?"

"Lazonetti," she told him, half proud—half fearfully, "and Carvalho and di Baritza."

"Mountebanks and money grabbers! . . . wheedlers of wages from would-be warblers! Bah! A crime . . . a waste of good money and more valuable time!"

"So they told me," she sighed resignedly. "Even the managers here say so. . . ."

"Managers of what?" . . . with fine scorn. "*Musical* comedy? . . . what sacrilege! . . . Of course they would not have you . . . these sordid seekers of shapes and purveyors of putrid banality! . . . Why? . . . Because you can sing—not mere inane obscenities, but arias beyond the throats of jazz Jezebels! . . . I am right? . . . *Bien!* . . . It will be time enough for sentiment when you have *arrived*. . . . The opera is no heavenly choir . . . but you will leave love outside the stage door . . . abandon amour, ye who enter here! . . . until you are great, and pause to grow temperamental *en route* to the perdition of oblivion!"

"Stratti, you're irrepressible . . . wound up!" Mrs. R.-S. intervened, signing to him to move away as she turned again to the girl. . . . "Are you hungry, my dear?"

"I was hoping to earn my dinner," Carol told her the truth. "I have not eaten since yesterday, I think . . . there were some coins . . . and my purse . . ." but she bit her lip . . . she did not wish to think of that.

"No matter. . . ." Mrs. R.-S. whispered. . . . "See, the coins are here, but the purse . . ."

"Bring a steak . . . a feast . . . a banquet!" shouted Stratini, clapping his hands and staring about, as he paused in his pacing of the rug. . . . "Someone *feed* this girl! . . . Fetch caviar and a salad, patés . . . sausages . . . a menu, I say . . . at once!"

"Be sensible—and be *quiet!*" laughed Mrs. R.-S., "sit down and subside! . . . Here is Judson with the brandy. . . . Yes, a little broth, some crackers . . .

nourishing but light and dainty . . . enough for the present."

"I am crushed!" Stratini bowed his head, assuming an abashed demeanor, but his eyes twinkled mirthfully as he berated himself: "I would have *stuffed* my little songster, eh?—and then, perhaps, she would burst! . . . *Pouf!* . . . *N'est-ce pas?* . . . exploded as a little pig, or a toy gas-balloon—like our charming Aline."

"*Great pig!*" Aline retorted, mimicking childish rebuttal. "Fat, insulting blimp! . . . swelled up with imagined importance!" And she made a moué at him.

"You are very kind," Carol protested faintly, and stirred uneasily, "but you mustn't bother . . ."

"Bother!" exclaimed Stratini. "Why should they not bother when *le Bon Dieu* has sent *you* to the window! For years I have searched and dreamed of a voice like yours!"

"I'm afraid *le Bon Dieu* has played you a shabby trick!" Carol discounted with pitiable humor. . . .

"Everyone else has laughed at me . . ."

"They dare not laugh at *me!* What do *they* know? Do not I—Baptiste Stratini—say that you can *sing?*" he bellowed belligerently.

For a moment she stared at him unbelievably. . . .
"Not *the* Stratini?"

"Who else?" with a little bow; then, breaking into a smile: "I see you are also intelligent. You have *heard* of me."

Deliberately, he screwed his monocle into his eye, and with the air of a connoisseur appraised her as he might have examined some rare treasure, just unearthed, and of doubtful intrinsic worth, despite its artistic appeal. His manner was critical . . . seeking flaws . . . for Stratini was not certain this girl was quite so innocent as she seemed . . . perhaps not guiltless of some ulterior motive . . . of resorting to subterfuge in order to gain his attention. Yet, as he surveyed her,

his chest swelled. His eye and his judgment seemed to confirm his trained ear.

"Umm! . . . Tch!" his tongue clacked, and he twirled his waxed mustache to tiny pin points . . . fondled his close cropped imperial . . . and then straightened back his heavy shock of hair. "There is but little lacking . . . the face, the figure—superb! . . . *oui*, there is magnetism—a subtle something which can be developed into personality . . . *and* the voice! Add to that, Baptiste Stratini, and *voilà!* . . . we have the finished product—an opera singer—a star!" In staccato, "I think you will do!"

"Do *what?*" Carol, guardedly suspicious, flushed beneath his impertinent summary of satisfaction, as he rudely voiced his opinion . . . at least, it would have been insufferable in another man . . . yet the others in the room did not seem to think his procedure strange.

"You will do as I say!" he snapped peremptorily. "Do you imagine I joke about *singing?* It is too vital a matter with me. . . . But come—you haven't told me who you are."

"Carol Drayton——" as though that were sufficient . . . even too much . . . and she trembled.

"An American?" . . . She nodded. . . . "Excellent! . . . A European myself, I am weary of them. Bolsheviks, monarchists, republicans . . . all loafers . . . dreamers . . . disturbers . . . too much of the temperament by far. I think you will be more reasonable—*n'est-ce pas?*"

The glint in his eyes puzzled her, and she was strangely disturbed by the smile on his handsome, swarthy features. "Why should you wish to do so much for me?" Carol doubted, skeptical even as to the identity he proclaimed.

"Because I am selfish and vain . . . resentful . . . plain disagreeable! If I make you a star, I shine in your reflected glory . . . I create a new luminary to

outshine my tarnished, eccentric and exotic galaxy . . . and in doing so I make jealous those so great children who shall soon become more obedient when Stratini speaks. Bah! They drive me insane with their posing and their tantrums. . . . But *you* shall be the clay . . . and I, Stratini, the molder!"

"Watch your step, Stratti!" teased Aline. "Don't do a Pygmalion and fall in love with your statue!"

"I *am* in love—with its prospect!"

"I mean more personally——"

"You mean more impudently than I permit!" he glared . . . really annoyed.

"You mustn't mind them," Mrs. R.-S. whispered, aware of the dawning distrust in Carol's mind.

"Perhaps you will find the clay unworthy," Carol warned. "Besides, I have no funds. If I am to go on, I must do something to earn a living. . . ."

"The girl is mad!" raved Stratini. "She talks of a living when I offer fame and fortune!"

"I've gone *one* day without eating," she reminded him. "I haven't liked it."

"Then don't do it again! I will provide bed and board—clothe you—in garments to which no strings shall be attached—other than those of restraint. You shall diet, but not starve. You shall work, yet you must play—pleasantly . . . not too hard. You will sing . . . and I forbid you to weep. In return, I promise you success—I, Stratini—but I warn you—your very soul will not be your own!"

"Oh, Stratti!" Aline shook her head roguishly. "You're giving her perfectly *wonderful* grounds for a breach of promise suit . . . and the Rector won't like your trifling with her *soul*!"

"The Rector be damned!" . . . beside himself. . . . "Where is that idiot with the broth?"

"Here, sir," Judson answered meekly, removing a decanter from the tabouret and replacing it with a tray.

"Eat!" commanded Stratini. "Be merry—laugh! To-morrow we shall *sing!*"

Carol smiled . . . looked a little eagerly toward the steaming soup . . . and then sneezed.

"Good God!" he shivered in alarmed apprehension . . . "don't do that! Colds are the bane of my existence! And they are inexcusable . . . the Rector should prohibit them!"

"It's your own fault!" Mrs. R.-S. accused him. "I don't know what we're thinking of, keeping her here like this in those wet clothes! Judson, carry the tray to Miss Aline's sitting room. . . . You run along, dear, and have Celeste get some dry things ready."

"What am *I* to do?" Stratini demanded petulantly.

"Go home . . . to bed . . . whatever you like!" Mrs. R.-S. dismissed him. "Only get out of the way!"

"If I were you, Stratti," Aline urged him, "I'd *kiss* Mummy for that! She treats you just like a pet poodle dog. You ought to be ashamed . . . *you!* Galli and Mary Garden say you're an untamed brute, but Mummy has you running around in circles!"

"Minx!" he shook his finger at her in exasperation, yet with a curious smile in his snapping eyes, "I'd like to take your advice . . . but perhaps it wouldn't be proper. I'd also like to turn you over my knee!"

But he went away docilely enough, and took Whitney Duane with him, bound for Gramercy Bleeker's rooms . . . to see if he still slept, and whether or not he had consumed all of his case of Scotch.

V.

A cold blast swept Park Avenue, and Stratini buried his chin in the collar of his fur coat, his long cigarette holder protruding half a foot before him as he braced himself against the biting wind, and, scorning a taxicab, walked southward with Whitney.

There was a powdering of late-season snow on the grass plots which masked the underground tracks of the New York Central, running beneath the street, and the lights of the huge buildings, clustered about the Forties, stood out clear and brilliant in the sharp evening air. Whitney looked at his watch. "Like to drop in at the Yale Club?" he suggested. "We might give Bleeker a ring from there."

Stratini shook his head. "I think not . . . if you don't mind. Let's go on to his rooms. Best to let sleeping dogs lie . . . but if he's up we'll kennel him. I'm just a bit dubious about that boy."

"You?" Whitney chuckled; then added, "Gramercy's hardly a youngster, you know."

"Too old to take the Rector's advice," Stratini agreed, "and probably old enough to resent suggestions from me."

"That's amusing . . . coming from Baptiste Stratini. You're not thinking of reforming Gram?"

"Bah! Reform nauseates me! I would not change him one iota. . . . I merely wish to find out what gifts the good God gave him."

"You believe in God?"

"Why not? He believes in me."

Whitney laughed. "That's funny."

"But why? If not, why am I entrusted with certain talents? I have never known anything to be done without a purpose—conscious or unconscious—either

in the working out of one's own destiny or else in influencing the acts of another . . . usually to further our own ends. . . . God doubtless had some selfish motive in placing me here on probation."

"Selfish?"

"Certainly. Am I sufficiently insignificant not to be a part of the divine scheme?"

"You and the Rector ought to get along better!"

"God forbid that I should be affiliated with these Alliances for the Abolition of Children's Toys! Nor do I care to be on the payroll of the great and good Jeremiah Punderbunk, whose cup of oil runneth over! Yet I would like to do what I may to make the world happier . . . not alone for Baptiste Stratini, but for all who care to join my little Society for the Suppression of Sadness. It's a gay little company, Whitney, my boy . . . may I put you up?"

"It sounds expensive," laughed Whitney.

"It isn't . . . and it is. One contributes one's own gifts, practices toleration, and battles valiantly against the hosts of gloom. Meddling is a misdemeanor . . . hypocrisy is punishable by hanging. Our fundamental weakness is the fact that we are all narrow. At best, I cannot agree with those whose views are not mine . . . but I strive prodigiously to mind my own business."

"But you were worrying about Gramercy?"

"Only wondering whether he is getting all he should out of life. There are false gods of pleasure as well as awesome idols of gloom. Gramercy's latest god is gin. Why?"

"Because he can't get good whiskey, probably. . . . His ancestors traded six bottles of schnapps for the whole of Manhattan Island . . . now Gramercy's selling the original purchase land in order to pay his bootlegger."

"Even the bootlegger is worthy of his hire," Stratini observed. "He has his purpose, and he is a cheer-

ful soul. Yesterday I dropped into a place on Sixth Avenue and chatted with the Irishman who violates the law there. I asked him what he thought about Prohibition, and he said, 'God bless the man who invented it.' There's tolerance for you. He bears them no ill will. . . . But, of course, he's prejudiced . . . the vicarious law pays him dividends."

They turned into Fifty-eighth Street and walked toward Fifth Avenue. A gust sweeping from Central Park cut through their heavy coats and made their faces tingle. It wrenched Stratini's cigarette from its holder and sent it scurrying along the pavement, leaving a trail of sparks in its wake. He caught his silk hat and jammed it down on his head and Whitney almost bent double against the wind.

Battling in silence, they struggled up the street, pausing before a brick and white stone façade, narrower and taller than any Colonial house, yet aping, in a measure, the architecture of one. They hurried into the basement entrance and Whitney pressed one of the buttons in a row of polished brass slots, into which personal calling cards were thrust. Stratini stamped his feet and beat his arms about his great chest. . . . Whitney rang again . . . impatiently. Then the door began to click its latch, and the two pushed past the curtained glass portal.

In the hallway their burning ears were greeted with sounds of hilarity, the blatant banging of a player-piano, mingling with other noises, suggesting that a riot was in progress in some near-by insane asylum. Obviously, Gramercy Bleeker was entertaining . . . having a party.

"The dead *do* come back," Whitney observed and began to mount the stairs.

"If so, I wonder why!" chuckled Stratini, and followed him up the flight. "Judging from the racket, I assume that a little company of congenial devils has returned with Bleeker."

"Whoshzat?" someone's alcoholic articulation stumbled over the balustrade.

"Two true believers desiring speech with the spirits!" Whitney called up as they rounded the turn.

"Thazshou, Whisney?" from Bleeker above.

"Right . . . and Stratini."

"Hi lishen!" Bleeker called over his swaying shoulder, through the open door of his diggings. "Heressh two new drinks . . . Wishney 'n' Strashini. . . . Good'un wot? . . . shtraight shtuff an' a cock-tail. . . ."

"Idiot!" Whitney scowled as he reached the top-most landing. "Why didn't you stay put when I tucked you in bed, and what's the big idea of this bathing suit!"

"Told y'wash gol'fish!" Bleeker grinned inanely. "Got shirens, too . . . nish shirens. . . . He-er shiren!" And as Stratini's eyes reached the level of the rail, a golden-haired mermaid danced into the hall, clad in a one piece beach costume and a pair of kid ballet shoes.

"Oooh! Look at Neptune!" giggled the girl, and Stratini, screwing his monocle under his bushy brow, regarded her with a sardonic grin.

"Come ri' in, ol' man o' shee!" Bleeker welcomed him with maudlin enthusiasm. "Got champagne 'n' everyshing . . . shsprish party . . . fashshleep when tel'phone ringsh. . . ."

The girl left them with a silly laugh and flitted back into the living room, where rugs had been rolled up and the furniture jammed into corners. The aroma of spilled liquor greeted their nostrils, mingled with exotic perfumes and the overpowering odor of lipstick, powder and perspiration; almost unbearable after the freshness of the outside air. Windows were down tight and the curtains were drawn, because the neighbors complained at ten-minute intervals . . . or perhaps because the girls were so scantily clothed.

They resembled will-o'-the-wisps as they moved amid the haze of cigarette smoke, through which the shaded electric lamps only faintly glowed. Stratini thought of a night in Nice as he looked in at the scene, observing a maid whose costume proclaimed her a Waterfall, and another who would have excited the envy of Eve, so skillfully was she bedecked with scanty adornment. Dancing with her was a youth in conventional Satyr's attire, and, placing a record on the victrola disc, was a sort of human bronze statue, into whose grinning lips had been thrust a cigarette. Flushed and hilarious, the company clapped its hands and stamped its feet on the floor as the new arrivals entered, and Nicholas Vanzandt staggered over to Whitney.

He announced himself as the ghost of John Barleycorn, and he proved a potent spirit as he thickly explained the purpose of the assembly. It seemed that they were *en route* to a masquerade . . . at the house of some friends, halfway across Long Island. In passing, they had honked their horns, but Bleeker had only slept on. Then they had bribed the hallboy, and entering with a passkey, had pulled him out from the covers, loudly demanding a drink.

At once Alicia Conniston . . . the siren Bleeker had mentioned . . . conceived the idea of Gram's getting into his bathing suit . . . so's he could go as her partner. This had somewhat incensed the Satyr, but the Man of Bronze developed brains and—laboring—gave birth to a great idea. They would dump out all the water from the aquarium and fill it up with champagne, passing it from lip to lip, while the frightened fantails disported themselves in the bubbles. Hailed with delight, his proposal was quickly acted upon, and, in due course of time, their pocket flasks replenished the flowing bowl. Now, Vanzandt announced, it contained a most novel punch, made from synthetic gin, with a dash or so of bay rum and the entire contents of the bottles from Bleeker's toilet table. Obviously this beverage

was not without its wallop, for the fish had long since ceased to wiggle their gills and had given up the ghost more than willingly.

Bleeker hospitably pressed this good cheer upon them, but neither Stratini nor Whitney were inclined to brave the dose. Whereupon the Waterfall seated herself at the keyboard and began to threaten it with utter annihilation. Her jazz drowned out the blare of the raucous phonograph, and the Lady of the Leaves and Beads began to agitate her body in a loose-jointed sort of shuffle, while the others gathered about and eagerly urged her on.

"*Demimonde?*" Stratini inquired, in a stage-whisper to Whitney.

"Not at all . . . débutantes . . . girls of rather good family," Duane shook his head. "The one at the piano's Nancy Tillington . . . you remember the kid whose marriage was lately annulled when her father raised Cain? . . . Ran away with a chauffeur, after he'd shot his rival—a traffic cop in the park. I believe she's engaged again now . . . to Bronze Buddha over there . . . he's Randolph Pruyn under that camouflage . . . rich young idiot!"

Stratini's gaze wandered from the dancer to the girl at the piano. One glittering rhinestone strap had slipped from her shoulder, and the absence of transparent waist—sunk into a little pool about her lap—gave her the appearance of a pink and white statue partly submerged in a shallow pool. Her form swayed with the syncopation, and she tossed back her brown bobbed curls, as she threw up her impudent chin to keep the smoke of her cigarette from smarting her eyes. They were bleary, lashes beaded, darkened below like a houri's.

Now she put down the cigarette to burn out on the music ledge and, with a crash of chords, swung around to demand that someone else take her place. The Satyr gave a flying leap and made the piano

bench, seating himself beside her and assaulting the keys with even greater fury. Waterfall began to whirl with Bronze Buddha, while Nick Vanzandt seized little Eve and cuddled her in the corner, announcing proudly to all the world that he held the record for uninterrupted, long-distance, endurance kissing.

Bleeker, in his bathing suit, and the blonde, whose costume would have shocked Ostend, were seated on the floor, legs curled beneath them as Gramercy tried to persuade a goldfish to sit up and sing. They were giggling like two kids, and their sides shook with mirth when Stratini palmed the little corpse and pretended to toss the fish down his throat.

Buffoon that he seemed, he glared at them sardonically, with a Machiavellian leer.

They were too drunk even to see the frown behind his smile.

The two sitting there in beach attire reminded Whitney of an early Gibson drawing, showing a group in evening dress, adorning a drawing room in postures only appropriate for the sands. Then he turned to stare at Stratini in utter astonishment. The impresario was uncorking a bottle, and proposing the quenching of thirst as an interlude to the fun.

"Say, Stratti," Whitney warned him, "if this crowd's ever going . . ."

But Stratini waved him aside peremptorily, and presented Bleeker's companion with a bubbling glass. In turn he plied the other two girls with champagne, but playfully refused that beverage to the men. Instead, he announced, brandy would be just right, and established the measure by downing a stiff drink himself.

"On the level, Stratti," Whitney nudged him again. "They oughtn't to have any more to drink. . . ."

"Get thee behind me!" Stratini laughed at him. "It will keep them out of mischief . . . just wait, and we shall see."

But, as Whitney had feared, it didn't. Instead, the

Waterfall lady became hysterically peevish, and an altercation with the Lady of the Leaves threatened appalling disaster to their thin disguises. This mêlée was mediated by the Satyr's kissing them both, and then Bleeker became possessed of another inspiration. Since he and Alicia Conniston were both arrayed for the waves, what could be more appropriate than a swim in the tub? They would turn on the shower and fill up the plunge with gin . . . only . . . confound it! . . . everyone had drunk so much that there wasn't enough. Alicia thought the suggestion rippingly splendid, and announced that she'd be a sport and get in without any cap. Nancy advised her not to, and Gramercy took offense, so Stratini came to the rescue and offered to sing a song.

They were keen for that, and Stratini appeared in his element, as he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, and sat down before the piano. Patting him on the back and shouting like mad, they crowded around him, all talking at once, and forgetful of other diversions. His long, heavily ringed fingers touched a tender lullaby . . . really beautifully . . . and from sheer amazement at the nature of his selection, everyone fell silent.

"Now!" he laughed aloud, as he took in their sheepish looks. "Now that you can hear me, I will sing my little song . . . yes? . . . and you shall all join in the chorus, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Now . . . we are ready? I shall sing you a little verse of my own composing!"

He began to play very softly, as they stared at him uncertainly. From the keys rippled the notes of *Where the River Shannon Flows*, and the Satyr, scorning all things emerald in his sober senses, began to blubber sentimentally. The others tried to comfort him . . . then, with exquisite burlesque in his intonation, Stratini began to put words to the air . . .

"She was a boot-leg-ger's daugh-ter,
And she sold hooch all day—
At *whatever* fancy prices
The *thirs-ty* boobs would pay!
Then she met a *Revenooer*—
A handsome guy was he!
. . . But he turned out a crook!
. . . All her profits he took!
And then—he went a-way-eee!"

They were all crying when he finished . . . all save Whitney, whose own eyes were wet with laughing at the perfectly serious way in which Stratini had rendered the absurd ballad. Vanzandt, who wrote impossible short stories for impossible magazines, and who was at work on a play when he wasn't playing about, saw great dramatic possibilities in the theme . . . meant to build a heart-throb thriller on it . . . Kentucky mountain stuff amid the cañons of New York . . . persecuted heroine rebels at disposing of wood alcohol to her father's clients . . . father didn't make the stuff, of course . . . innocent old party . . . and then the big wallop, where honest revenue agent . . .

"Hell!" the Satyr brcke in, his patience exhausted, "ain't no such animal . . . like to have the job for a week. . . ."

"Shut up!" Waterfall slapped his face. "He's going to sing it again."

And he did, as tears ruined synthetic complexions and Bronze Buddha sobbed hiccoughingly from the sofa, upon which he sank from exhaustion, overcome with grief. But Stratini was not content to rest upon his laurels. Like some earnest chorus-director, he was teaching them the words . . . repeating them over and over . . . trying a line with piano accompaniment, and then shaking his great fist at them as though utterly disgusted. But at last he nodded with satisfaction, and, seizing a riding crop to use as a baton, led them through the stanza . . . his manner as serious as that of a maestro rehearsing a mass.

"Now . . . with just a little more of the sentiment . . . a trifle more softly!" He raised his fingers like the man in the hair tonic advertisement . . . beamed upon them persuasively . . . and then nodded with satisfaction as they tried, with pathetic earnestness, and horrible harmony, to make their voices blend . . .

"She was a boot-leg-ger's daugh-ter . . .!"

From the outer door came the sound of a battering ram, accompanied by a furious ringing of the telephone . . . an exasperated, persistent jangle. Indignant, soul-wearied calls came from the court, penetrating the closed windows and heavy hangings which shut out the night but did not imprison the din.

Whitney answered the summons from the hall, and a wrathful figure in overalls presented himself beligerently. "Ye'll have to be cuttin' this out!" he roared at them, "the folks in the house is raisin' hell!"

"Let 'em!" Bleeker responded, dangling beside the cellarette. "Our motto is 'Let the neighbors move!'"

"Can't get vans 'nough!" shouted Bronze Buddha. "C'mon . . . ev-erybody! Wow!"

"C'min an' 'ave drink!" invited the spirit of Barley-corn, hospitably.

The Janitor would *not* . . . he proposed to call the police . . . they couldn't get away with that stuff any longer! But they did . . . at least Waterfall did. She danced alluringly toward the sweaty man, threw her white arms about his bull neck, and, pecking at a stubbly cheek as red as her painted lips, dragged him into the room.

"Oooh! See my nice cave man!" she shrieked with delight, and with her own hands forced ambrosia upon him. The kick of the loving cup, the heat of the room, and Waterfall's languorous smile, mellowed and softened his heart. Five minutes later, the phone having been disconnected, the Janitor was teetering on top

of the table, and trying his best to balance a goldfish on the end of his nose.

Then Bleeker spoiled it all by bursting out crying afresh. He had just remembered something he'd forgotten . . . and it was up to them all to make it right with the girl!

What girl? . . . Funny that. . . . Nice girl . . . kind girl . . . sittin' all 'lone on bench in park. . . . Lost her pocketbook . . . handbag . . . thing women carry 'n' drop. . . . He'd picked it up . . . found it in his coat when he'd come in . . . meant to go out and look for her and give it back. Forgot all about it. They'd *all* go . . . now!

From the table he rescued a silken purse. Lying amid a nest of smoking ash trays, the beaded Parisian thing had recalled his momentary glimpse of the girl, and now he held it up so they all might see it. His mood grew morose and the tears streamed down his cheeks . . . a ridiculous exhibition of maudlin woe. She'd picked up his cigarette case for him . . . and he'd treated her like that. . . . Wasn't right . . . rotten! . . . not sporting. Money in it, too . . . maybe she needed it. . . . Simply had to find her!

Disgusted, Whitney snatched the bag from his hand and crumpled it into his own pocket. It *was* rotten! Who or what the girl might have been, made no difference. Maybe she *did* need the contents of that purse . . . a minutely folded five-dollar bill and a few feminine trinkets. . . . Whitney did not examine them. This fool had taken the thing without even knowing he'd done it! But out of sight would be out of mind—in his present condition, and of course any search that night was out of the question. Whitney pictured this crazy assembly—half dressed—more than half fuddled, invading the Park with shouts and snatches of song . . . visioned the Night Court . . . telephone calls and bail . . . and a scandal when the papers came out the

next afternoon! Hardly! It was a mighty good thing he and Stratti had come.

Anyway, he'd speak to Gram in the morning, advertise the purse, and see if its owner could be located. Bleeker made no protest. He was trying to bet the Janitor fifty dollars that he couldn't stand on his head. Tempted by the reward, the overalled one was nevertheless dubious. Too tired . . . he was busy . . . had to look after cutie. But Waterfall shoved him away from her and declined to take a dare. She could and would stand on *her* head, and she'd bet anyone a hundred!

Then Stratini intervened. As he might have handled an infant, he tossed her over his knee, and with gusto spanked her soundly, chuckling with delight as she kicked the piano bench in a tantrum of petulant fury and screeched vengeance upon him at the top of her lungs.

"Now," Stratini announced with the voice of authority, as he released the struggling girl, "the party is over, my children, and all of us will go home."

"I *won't!*" Waterfall flared. "You're a beast!" Then she reeled into a corner, leaning against the wall as the room spun dizzily before her eyes.

Hushed, stupidly uncomprehending, the others stared at her, not knowing whether to laugh or go to her rescue. Then they began to protest . . . thickly, peevishly, incoherently. Everybody was asking everyone else *who* wanted to go home and why. . . . What time was it, anyway? . . . What had become of the car. . . . Somebody ought to produce a drink!

Stratini shook his head. Morpheus and Barleycorn had allied themselves. The Janitor was asleep beneath the table and Bleeker had disappeared into his bedroom. Whitney looked in and found him flat on his face across the counterpane. On the floor was a woman's fur wrap, where it had fallen as Gramercy apparently had tried to wrap it about his bathing suit.

He was slobbering and mumbling . . . something about going out . . . and then he succumbed completely, lying with mouth wide open, his breath heavy with liquor.

"Oh, you *damned* fool!" Whitney looked down contemptuously; and then, with a shrug, went back to see what Stratini was doing.

Nick Vanzandt, barely able to articulate, was attempting to argue with him, drunkenly—insisting upon fixing everything up; but Stratini brushed him aside, declining to be pestered, and beckoned to Whitney.

"See if their motor is downstairs," he directed. "If it is, tell the chauffeur to come up and take charge of Bronze Buddha, and Satyr and Barleycorn. Tell him to drive them wherever they belong . . . he can look after *them*."

"But what about the girls?" Whitney hesitated. "Little Eve's fast asleep, and Mermaid's ill, and Waterfall can't even stand." She was on the verge of hysterics, and Whitney supported her with one arm, wondering whether the Janitor's snores would shatter the windows.

"You know their addresses . . . these dainty doves?" Stratini inquired with a smile.

"Of course," Whitney answered, "but I don't see . . ."

"It is quite simple," Stratini assured him. "You and I will deliver them, all safe in a taxicab, before their poor, dear mothers even know they've been out. . . ."

"It's after three," Whitney doubted, consulting his watch, as Waterfall fell limp across his arm, blissfully oblivious of the disgusting disorder of her costume.

"Precisely," chuckled Stratini. "Either their parents won't have come home as yet, or else they'll have been asleep so long they won't hear us arrive. We'll pass the little darlings in to the servants . . . and then be on our way."

"Can't say I'm keen about it!" Whitney grumbled. "I suppose *we'll* be accused of getting them beastly soused!"

Stratini laughed. "You so great innocent!" he slapped him on the back. "It was to accomplish that little thing that I did what you thought was not best. To tell them they'd had enough would only have made them stubborn. That is the Rector's method. Instead, I put them 'down and out.' Now we shall take them home. The party is finished . . . they do *not* go on to Long Island . . . to be smashed up in an auto wreck, or to wake up at daylight, somewhere along the road *en dishabillé*. And since you and I are chaperones, they get into no more mischief."

"Why, you old chameleon!" Whitney changed his tune. "Imagine Baptiste Stratini in the rôle of Nemesis . . . a duenna to drunken debbies!"

"I am versatile in my whims . . . and sometimes inconsistent," Stratini smiled. "To-night, I feel very moral. I think I shall take a drink. Then, when the ladies are tucked in the taxicab, I should like to have a look at that purse poor Bleeker was bawling about."

VI.

A SILENT-STEPPING, quiet-spoken maid gently awakened Carol, and respectfully announced that her bath was ready. She could hear the warm water running into a tub in the tiled room adjoining the guest chamber, where she had slept amid the softness of a dainty, lace-covered bed, an adorable nightgown of Aline's caressing her flesh with silken tenderness.

The room was bright with sunshine, filtering through the delicate curtains, and its tasteful furnishings were a delight to her awakening eyes. Yet the reality seemed more fantastic than her dreams of the night, through which she had searched without hope of success, for a missing beaded handbag and a tiny slip of paper. High and low she had looked for it, through a fantastic nightmare in which she was pursued at every turn by a relentless policeman, who insisted upon dressing her in a coarse blue frock, and prodded her with his club as she sewed unceasingly upon what appeared to be charwomen's aprons. Again, a diabolical face would grin into hers, and two flaming eyes, beneath bushy brows, would sneer as the man made her sing . . . sing as she had never sung before! His soul-searching scrutiny hypnotized her, and although she felt afraid, his unwelcome domination was utterly fascinating. Yet always, there was the policeman . . . shadowy sometimes, but ever loitering near . . . like some blue and brass-buttoned vulture . . . watching her cunningly. . . . That was why she must find her purse! . . . If she didn't he would lead her off to an island . . . a place of high stone walls . . . of tiny rooms with barred windows . . . where there were little cots on which one could not rest . . . and where

one must sew and sew and sew . . . from morning until night!

It was horrible . . . more so because it was not a mere phantasm . . . but a memory made more poignant with the passing of troubled sleep.

Yet, in the moment of greeting the morning, the unbelievable superseded distorted reality, and dawning recollection brought consciousness of her strange situation.

Outside the window, she could hear the purr of a high-powered motor. It flashed back the picture of a brilliantly lighted court-yard, of pretty little trees, and of dusky men in atrociously gaudy uniforms. Water, splashing in the bathtub, suggested a fountain . . . and with it came identification of the man whose eyes had terrified her throughout the night . . . the man who promised her a future so fairylike that the metamorphosis made Carol certain she must be Cinderella.

But now she must make up her mind whether or not to remain with these pleasant people . . . women whose motives she could not doubt, yet which she could not quite understand. Without reason or obligation, other than the kindness of their hearts, they offered her help in attaining what she longed for above everything else. They pointed with powerful fingers, and with hands that were able to aid, to the goal she had sought for so long . . . and so unsuccessfully. Not that she failed in gratitude, but because she had found the world cold, she could hardly believe it all true. They were of New York, and Manhattan had given Carol the unkindest cut of all.

Yet despite their seeming real interest, and their generous impulses, she knew she could never have passed their door if these folks had known the tale which her purse could tell. Carol could picture Mrs. R.-S. shielding Aline from contamination . . . staring at her with abhorrence, and telling the haughty Judson to turn

her into the street from which she had come. She could not blame them. There *was* no explanation. Her patronesses regarded her filched purse as inconsequential trash; yet with it was gone a certificate she could ill afford to lose. Ironically enough, this reference vouched for her lack of good name. And extenuate as she might, it would brand her forever in the eyes of a possible finder. The mere fact that the paper was missing had not tortured her mind; but rather the fear as to *who* might discover and read it.

But a plunge in the rose-marble tub would help her to think more clearly, so she slipped on a fluffy peignoir lying across the bed, and tucked her toes into satin mules. Then when her body tingled from the touch of a turkish towel, she slipped back into the boudoir and looked curiously about. Her own clothes were nowhere in sight, but the maid had laid out a profusion of dainty things which she knew must be Aline's. Her sensation was one of sheer delight as she took them up separately, exclaiming over each garment before she tried it on. She was glad the maid had not waited . . . she wanted to be by herself . . . and the joy of the feel of the fabrics made her sing in an undertone.

Spread over the back of a chair was a fetching morning frock, as chic as Aline herself, yet it might have been made for Carol, so wonderfully did it become her. A pier glass told her a story of lovely transformation, and the reflection seemed to be that of a care-free girl. Thoughtfully, she powdered her olive-tinted cheeks, and she could not resist the lure of a lipstick. The touch of an eyebrow pencil, and she smiled back at the mirrored picture, an expression of utter wonder creeping into her eyes.

She clicked the high heels of her tiny pumps, which fitted her to perfection, and the little shoes seemed so new that they might never have been worn. Then she made a little curtsey to the girl in the mirror, and looking about bewildered, wondered what next to do.

But Aline herself appeared, to take her in charge, and she greeted her guest with an intimacy which ended Carol's perplexity. "I'm so glad the things fit," she said, viewing the *tout ensemble* with evident approval. "Celeste took your measurements, but even when one has time, these ready-made shops are makeshifts."

Carol stared at her in surprise; then she understood. A maid had been sent on a shopping tour, and everything she had on had been purchased for her.

"Really!" she flushed, "I don't know how to say thank you."

"You've done beautifully, by looking the way you do!" Aline exclaimed in sincere admiration, and, throwing her arms about Carol, kissed her in sisterly fashion. "Do come along, if you're ready. Mummy's in the breakfast room and Whitney just telephoned. My dear, you can't imagine what a corking idea he has! It's so perfectly splendid I can't wait to tell you about it!"

Her spirits were so spontaneous that Carol caught them instantly as Aline slipped her arm through hers and led the way to the table where her mother was waiting. For the moment Carol forgot her purse, and its secret seemed very vague. Even Baptiste Stratini . . . and his spectre of her dreams . . . were hazy and unimportant . . . like the bluecoated policeman, personifying her fears. Yet she felt that this background of wonderful happiness must be a vision too. However, while it lasted, she wished to enjoy the experience to the full . . . to drink in the peace and comfort of that restful apartment, until the crisis she knew must come, should arrive to mar it all. Yet feeling so, she seated herself with a sense of guilt which would not down. For after all, she told herself, she had no right to deceive them . . . to accept their trust and companionship, under the circumstances.

Judson served her with fruit and cream as her hostess examined her mail, passing most of the en-

velopes to a spectacled secretary. Then Mrs. R.-S. looked up, and smiled at Carol. "I suppose you're eager to know what Whitney phoned about," she said with a glance at Aline. "This child has been simply bursting to break the news."

Carol put down her spoon with a sinking sensation. She wondered whether the call could concern her purse . . . and decided that it couldn't. In any event, she would know in another moment.

"It seems that Whit and Stratti went for a walk last night," Aline broke in, "and from the way his voice sounded over the wire, I don't imagine that Whit got to bed till late. Anyway, they'd been talking about what we plan for you. . . ."

"If you please, Aline," her mother said gently, "I'd rather explain to Carol myself. While, of course, there's no reason why she *should* feel so, I can understand that she may, or rather might, have had, a certain sense of delicacy about remaining with us. . . ."

If what was coming promised to prove unpleasant, Mrs. R.-S.'s manner was reassuring, and Aline broke in despite her mother's injunction. . . .

"Well, she *can't* have now . . . if we do as Whit suggests!"

Carol was silent, not knowing what to say . . . trembling with anxious anticipation, despite her efforts to sit there calmly.

"Whitney's really very clever," Mrs. R.-S. went on, "a lawyer, you know . . . and, I'm told, quite a paradox . . . a really successful, yet honest one. It seems that he doesn't think Stratti should have all the credit for discovering you, and suggests that we form a partnership . . . an association of mentors . . . until you are fully launched on an operative career."

Carol smiled. "Your confidence is as generous as your kindness," she said in deprecation of her own worthiness. "I only wish I deserved it."

"You mustn't have that idea," Mrs. R.-S. reproved.

"You see Stratti is really a wonder in a musical way. He's not given to chance opinions when it comes to singing, and I'm sure he would not make a promise he felt he might not fulfill. We all believe in him . . . implicitly. But while we're all broad-minded, we can't afford to forget that Stratti's a man of the world . . . and you are a charming girl. And Whitney, you see, is the nephew of the Reverend Doctor Duane. . . ."

"I've read some of his sermons," Carol said with a smile, and the faintest trace of amusement came into her troubled eyes. "He probably wouldn't approve of me . . . if he knew how I came to be here. . . ." She might have said more, and meant to . . . but something within her called halt.

"Oh, the Rector doesn't really matter," Aline interrupted. "It's your own contentment we're thinking about. The dominie makes me wild-eyed once in a while!"

"I wish you wouldn't criticize, my dear," Mrs. R.-S. objected. "Carol will doubtless appraise the Rector for herself in due time. . . . Meanwhile, none of us wish you to consider yourself under the slightest obligation to us. We want you to feel that what we may do for you is purely a business arrangement . . . prompted on our part by an interest in opera as well as a liking for you. In financing your studies, Whitney suggests that we merely lend you the money . . . to be paid back to us when your earnings warrant it."

"If they ever do!" Carol laughed . . . bitterly . . . yet keenly interested in the proposed plan.

"Oh, they will!" Mrs. R.-S. prophesied confidently. "Of course, it will not be easy. You will have to work very hard, and at times I'm afraid you will find Stratti exasperating. But the man's really a marvel . . . and personally delightful, when he isn't on one of his tantrums against intolerance. However, Whitney suggests that we form a sort of stock company, and that all of us shall be shareholders. . . ."

"I'm glad you're not risking your all in the hope of tremendous profits!" Carol said nervously.

"Naturally," Mrs. R.-S. assured her without ostentation, "the investment we'll make will not prove pinching . . . yet the thought of our advancing substantial sums of money might embarrass you under other conditions."

"It would," Carol admitted. "And I'm not sure that it won't . . . anyway."

"Why?" asked Mrs. R.-S. "Whitney's coming this afternoon to lay it all before us. He wants to incorporate you. . . ."

"*Incorporate* me?" Carol exclaimed incredulously. "I thought corporations had to do with stocks and steel, and coal and things . . . that they were sordid and soulless, and scandalously rich. . . ."

"Some are notoriously poor . . . from the standpoint of dividends," Mrs. R.-S. laughed. "I've learned that to my sorrow. But the idea is that I shall estimate your expenses for the next two years . . . the cost of your gowns and your hats and your maintenance . . . everything you will need . . . plus the cost of your training . . . exclusive of Stratti, of course. We pay in the total capital, and Stratti will manage the corporation. If he doesn't make good . . . he loses his job. . . ."

"And you lose your money," Carol reminded her. "I lose my self-respect."

"Nonsense!" protested Aline. "You're going to put it over! . . . and I'm going to take twenty shares in you! I've money enough of my own, and Mummy says I may."

The tears came to Carol's eyes, and Aline sprang up from her chair. "Oh, you mustn't feel *that* way!" she said sympathetically. "Think what fun it will be, and what a thrill for me, when you're a famous star and I can come to your dressing room!"

"Seriously," Mrs. R.-S. continued, "I favor the ar-

rangement. It will give you a greater feeling of independence to know that some day you can buy back the stock for which we subscribe. We will have had interest on our money, so you will owe us nothing . . . and we will be amply repaid when we hear you sing at the Knickerbocker."

"I hardly know what to say," Carol peered into her coffee, "much as I appreciate all that you wish to do. It isn't merely that you are willing to *invest* in me . . . to guarantee my future as it were, . . . it's the fact that you are willing to associate with me . . . to let me enjoy Aline's friendship . . . since I understand that you mean me to live with you." For a moment she paused, and a flush crept over her features. "You know *nothing* of me. I may be unspeakable. . . ."

"Oh, Carol!" mocked Aline. "*Have* you a past . . . really?"

"My dear child!" Mrs. R.-S. chided, "I am a woman of the world, and Stratti is nobody's booby. I don't imagine you'll contaminate my precious, precocious daughter, and I hope your earnest industry will be an example to her."

She was laughing behind the serious look in her eyes, and Aline made a little face at her mother. But Carol was not smiling, although she wiped the tears from her cheeks and looked at the two very seriously.

"If you mean what you say, in the spirit I think you do," she said to Mrs. R.-S., "I'll be only too glad to accept the conditions . . . and I'll be the happiest girl who ever found true friends. There *are* some things I'd rather not speak about . . . some things I'd like to forget . . . but I can't believe you'd blame me if I told the whole truth. . . ."

"It isn't necessary," Mrs. R.-S. said. "I'm rather a reader of character, and I'm willing to take you on faith. Stratti will be, too, so far as the past is concerned, but your future will depend upon what you do from now on."

"Oh, I'll work!" Carol pledged eagerly, "I'll try with all that's in me . . . be a slave to my studies . . . and if I *do* fail, it won't be for any lack of wanting to win!"

"So that's that!" snapped Aline practically. "Now that we're through with business, come on into my room and we'll plan out a *regular* shopping tour!"

"Oh, by the way," Mrs. R.-S. recalled, as they arose from the table, "Whitney said something about seeing Gramercy . . . at a rather racy party he had in his rooms last night. In view of the way he left here, and from all that I hear of his doings, I rather think poor Gram is riding for a fall. . . ."

"A Fool and his Honey gather no orange blossoms . . . wedding ones, I mean," Aline observed with a grimace. "Gramercy's simply daffy over vacuum-flappers!"

Mrs. R.-S. smiled with understanding of her daughter's mood. "I'm sure you're sufficiently vacuous, dear: don't try to outrival them! But it seems that Gramercy picked up a woman's purse somewhere or other. I believe you mentioned losing yours," she turned to Carol. "Whit thought perhaps . . ."

"But it couldn't be hers, Mummy dear!" Aline remembered suddenly. "Gram caved in and went home before Carol arrived."

"That's true," Mrs. R.-S. agreed, "I'd forgotten. Whitney, no doubt, did too."

VII.

"SCOTCH or oolong, or pekoe or gin? Which shall it be, old dear?" Aline inquired, arching her penciled eyebrows.

Gramercy Bleeker struck a mock-dramatic attitude beside the tea-wagon and pretended to sing: "My Bonnie lies over the ocean. . . . Oh, bring back my Bonnie to me . . . hee-ee!"

"She's yours!" grinned Aline and passed him the decanter. "Gram, you're positively hopeless. Now before you get all fuddled again, do give an account of yourself."

"No can do!" he protested. "Might shock pretty little ears, and might tend to incriminate and degrade me, as our legal friend Whitney would say . . . or *has* he been saying, perhaps?"

"Certainly not!" Aline denied. "Only he *hinted* over the 'phone. . . ."

"Oh, he did, did he?" chuckled Bleeker. "Then I shall ask *him* what I've been doing. No doubt *he* knows. But on the level, Aline, I didn't know I was butting in on a business meeting. I hope you'll forgive me, Miss Drayton."

"I'm sure there's nothing to forgive," Carol replied, rather wishing that she could slip away without seeming rude. Bleeker *was* the man she had seen in the park. She recognized him the moment he entered the room, and with that recognition came a fresh feeling of panic. No doubt he had picked up her purse, and naturally enough, he would have examined it. Now, if he remembered her—if his scrambled senses could piece out the puzzle-picture of the girl he had seen on the bench—she was in for a decidedly bad quarter of an

hour. She dreaded it . . . but even more, she drew back from what must follow.

"That's fine of you," Bleeker said genuinely. "I'm glad you weren't here last night in time to see me do a fade-out—like a villain in a society screen atrocity. But I only came back this afternoon to make amends to Aline and her mother. . . ."

"And you promptly start out to get mellow again!" Aline accused, banteringly. "What's all this business about you're picking pockets and stealing some poor girl's handbag?"

Carol bit her lip, and a flush tinted her dark cheeks as she dropped her eyes to her teacup, not daring to meet Bleeker's. Much as she wished that bag back, and much as she longed to know who had found what was in it, she trembled as she waited for him to answer. And he was deliberately long about doing it.

"Oh, *that*?" he said to gain time, a smile coming into his eyes. "The one I was going to auction off or something . . . ?"

Carol's fingers clenched convulsively. She somehow felt that she could not bear his making sport of her property . . . his joking about a thing which meant so much to her. But with an effort she stifled a desire to scream, and sat tense and silent as Bleeker struck a match and lit a cigarette.

"I'm afraid, my dear, I shall have to refer your question to my attorney," he said with pretended seriousness. "I retain Whit for just that purpose. By the way, where is he?"

"Telephoned to say he was on the way uptown," Aline explained. "And mother's off in the motor; she's going to stop for Stratini on her way back."

"Stratti coming too? Thought he was busy as a little bee smoothing or maybe ruffling his songbirds' feathers."

"So he is. Mother's going to pick him up at the

Opera House . . . but of course you didn't know that his latest songbird's *here!*"

"Really?" Bleeker asked, with an incredulous glance at Carol. "Miss Drayton looks too charmingly human to be a prima donna. They're all so infernally upstage and head over heels in love with themselves."

"Perhaps I am too!" Carol laughed mellifluously. There was almost a joyous note of relief in her tone. Either the man did not know her, or else he determined to keep his own counsel . . . for the present at least. Yet it was Whitney Duane who had phoned about the handbag, and evidently Duane had it in his possession. So the ordeal was not over, although she had a respite.

"Oh, I'm sure you're not . . . not even as crazy about yourself as Aline is. . . . Anyway, since I'm here . . . Success!" And he drained his glass.

"That's the deoch and doris," Aline retaliated, "until Mummy and Stratti come at least. Then, perhaps, if you're a good little lamb, Whitney'll fleece you by letting you buy some nice stock . . . stock in Miss Drayton's company . . ."

"Oh, please!" protested Carol, and Aline was instantly sorry.

"He hasn't an idea what I mean," she said, intending to put Carol at her ease and cover up her *faux pas*. "What's more, I don't intend to tell him," she added with a wink, and a further effort at camouflage. "You see I thought he might pay to promote some of Whitney's schemes with the proceeds of his pickpocketing—and thus do proper penance for his sins."

Bleeker grinned and had a facetious retort on the tip of his tongue when he caught a glimpse of the half-hidden agony in Carol's eyes. He had not quite understood what Aline set out to say in thoughtless jest, but he instantly sensed that the subject must be distasteful to Carol. And at once he changed the subject so skillfully that even Carol herself was not aware

that he did so intentionally . . . because he had read the distress which signaled from her evident emotion. Yet despite the fact that he rattled on like a good-natured lunatic, principally teasing Aline, he was wondering what in the devil ailed the other girl.

Rather stunning, he thought her . . . peach of a girl, in fact . . . somehow reminded him of someone he'd seen before . . . but he couldn't place her, and it didn't seem very likely that he'd ever met her, if she was an opera singer. Then the mantle clock chimed five.

"Guess I'd better toddle, old top," he said to Aline. "Offer my humble regrets to your mother, and try to forgive my foolishness . . . won't you?"

"I don't think so . . . unless you 'fess up about the handbag," she shook her head, returning to that subject again because she saw it embarrassed him . . . without the slightest knowledge that she was making Carol endure the most exquisite torture.

Then, with sudden daring . . . a feeling that the plunge was better by far than waiting . . . Carol took her cue from the care-free Aline, and just as she had intended, disarmed Bleeker completely.

"But really," she said with a whimsical smile, "don't you think you're unfair to keep us guessing? You see I lost a purse myself last evening . . . and in it was something I prized, very, very highly."

"Mean it?" asked Bleeker, really concerned and sympathetic. "I'm sorry!" . . . He had spoken like that in the park . . . when Carol was afraid he was going to sit down. . . . "But the thing I'm sorry about is the fact that it couldn't be yours. . . ."

"Why couldn't it?" Carol persisted, taking unfair advantage of his effort at gallantry, just a moment before.

"Why, because . . . well, I suppose it *could* be," he admitted, puzzled. Hang it! If the turn of the con-

versation annoyed the woman, why on earth did she bring it up again? However, in desperation, he blurted out the truth. "I don't know where I got hold of it, and I don't recall what was in it. I think Whit, or maybe Stratti, took it away from me. . . ."

"Signor Stratini . . . examined it?" Carol exclaimed, and both Bleeker and Aline stared at her, somewhat surprised.

"Oh, Stratti's not such a pirate as he looks!" Aline assured her. "If it is yours, it's much safer in Stratti's hands than even in Whitney's . . . but that must be our counsel now . . ." as she heard him in the hallway. . . . "Just a moment, and I'll bring him. . . ."

Carol wanted to stop her . . . to follow . . . anything to prevent her being alone with the man who was now regarding her with guarded but curious interest. Instinctively, she felt that he was associating her with that park bench . . . that, given time, his memory would be certain to identify her. But Aline was gone, wanting a word with Whitney before he entered the room . . . to prime him to twit Bleeker about buying some stock that had nothing to do with Carol, and thus preserve the secret of their little corporation.

"Of course you weren't serious?" Bleeker turned to her, a curious expression in his narrowed eyes. "I did look inside the thing, but I really don't remember. . . ."

He hesitated, as though trying his best to recall the bag's contents, and Carol, leaning forward, gazed at him steadily. He felt the intensity of her look, and raised his brows questioningly. "I wonder," he speculated in a subdued tone, "whether, for any reason, you'd rather I *didn't* . . ." He hesitated, looking toward the doorway as Whitney came in with Aline, and purposely did not finish the sentence.

"I'd like it ever so much . . . if you . . . *couldn't!*" Carol whispered to him, hardly understanding why she

took such a course . . . just why she trusted him. Yet she did.

"Right!" Bleeker agreed with a smile. "My status is that of a victim of total amnesia!"

But Aline had seized upon the purse as Whitney's entrance cue, and now she laughingly told him of Bleeker's confusion, and saucily insisted that Whitney relate in detail the whole disgraceful story. "I'm honestly afraid to let him into the house!" she rattled on with an excited effort to seem utterly innocuous. "If you don't explain at once, I shall 'phone for a private detective before the man takes my jewels."

"You tell 'em, Whit," Bleeker grinned, and to the lawyer's amazement, made an unmistakable gesture cautioning silence. "I've just been saying to Miss Drayton that none of us have the faintest idea . . ."

But Whitney did not seem to catch the signal, or else misinterpreted its meaning. "Of course you haven't . . . and never did have . . . about anything!" he arraigned his friend with pretended contempt. "But as your attorney, I won't give you away. I'm here to protect you, my boy."

"Thanks!" breathed Bleeker, and then gave up the attempt to head Whitney off. It was too late in any event, for reaching into his pocket, Whitney produced the bag Carol had lost.

If he saw the color fade from her face, he gave no outward sign of it, as he handed the bit of beaded silk to Aline; yet Bleeker knew in an instant that the purse was Carol's and now he was almost certain . . . yes, sir, he was sure . . . that the girl at the tea-wagon *was* the one in the park.

And as Aline handed the bag to her, and she took it reluctantly, Carol was fully aware of what Bleeker knew. For an instant she wished she had not appealed to him . . . she was almost on the verge of telling the three the truth . . . then something within her held

her back, and, pulling the tasseled cord, she dumped the contents of the bag out into her lap.

A wadded handkerchief . . . a powder compact. A little shake, and a latchkey released itself from the slightly torn lining. Then a crumpled banknote fluttered to the floor. Not knowing whether the currency was wrapped about something secret . . . whether it hid some evidence that Miss Drayton wished to conceal, Bleeker could not surmise; but he quickly bent to the rug and recovered it.

"My reward?" he asked meaningly, wondering what she would answer. "May the finder keep the money?" If she assented the others need not see whatever it might mask.

Carol's fingers were unsteady as she shook the bag again without result, and then looked quickly into its corners. There was nothing else. Whoever had seen it . . . whoever had it . . . the thing she wanted . . . the thing she feared . . . was gone. And then she laughed as she gathered the various articles from her lap and dropped them carelessly back where she had found them.

"I'm afraid I can't decide such a momentous question," she smiled at Bleeker. "You see . . . the bag isn't mine."

She could have bitten her tongue for that lie . . . yet she could not admit its ownership . . . much as she hated herself when it dawned upon her what Bleeker might suspect. Yet before she could even appeal to him with a look, or thank him with a half-perceptible nod, Mrs. R.-S. and Stratini came into the room.

"Ah, so!" laughed the impresario, throwing back his head and swelling his great chest as he bellowed with merriment. "Here is our little charter member of Sir Oliver's Lodge! Wasn't that what you said he belonged to, eh, Whitney, my boy . . . this so very dead to the world young man, who bobs up again so serenely?"

"We're trying to solve the mystery of what he's been doing . . . where he was and who he saw, while in the other world!" Aline continued her taunting, as she poured her mother a cup of tea. "The question is, *who* was the lovely lady . . . ?"

"*The* lovely lady!" chuckled Stratini. "My dear, there were ever so many, blonde and bobbed, and bold and bad . . . so bad that I had to spank one!"

"Oh, I say!" Bleeker protested. "Really, that's not fair . . . or true, is it?"

"Ah, never fear!" Stratini patted his shoulder. "Stratini is a great bear, but he is not what you call the cad! So I will spare your blushes . . . and the ladies shall be nameless . . . even though we still look for the little Cinderella whose purse the Fairy Prince is so distracted about. Come, my dears . . . you have searched its contents?" he turned to the three women with an appealing gesture, his eyes twinkling, despite their feigned seriousness. "It is not yours, my dear hostess? Nor yours, my little ugly sister . . . and then, if it is not *yours*, my dear . . ." he glanced with lightning-like interrogation at Carol . . . "then we are all at sea again!"

"It *wasn't* yours, of course?" Mrs. R.-S. asked Carol. "What a pity!"

Yet Carol's cheeks burned, and she felt as though she would faint, as she shook her head and faintly answered "No."

"Ah . . . good!" Stratini exclaimed, rubbing his hands, as though relieved that such was the dénouement. "I cannot have my little songbird enmeshed in romance so soon . . . especially with this Lothario of a Bleeker! But . . . all of you . . . what say? Shall we let him become a member of our little corporation . . . eh?"

"Stratti, do you think . . . ?" Mrs. R.-S. hesitated, fearing that Carol might be humiliated by the admission of a stranger.

"But of course I think!" Stratini thundered. "In he shall come. . . . I like him . . . he is *such* a great fool! Then Whitney shall read his stupid papers to us, and we shall pay up very promptly like good business people. . . . After that, whether you like it or not, I shall have a little private conversation with my pupil . . . in another room."

No one spoke. The little clock struck the quarter hour, and Carol sighed, faintly.

"So!" Stratini announced with a deal of self-satisfaction. "It is unanimous. It is arranged. Make haste with your reading, Whitney . . . and, if you are not utterly without the manners of a well brought-up young lady, give me an oh, so *very*—large drink of cognac, my charming Aline!"

VIII.

IN the music room, Stratini closed the door softly, and then for a moment stared fixedly at Carol. She shrank from the man, half in fear, half in guilt, not certain whether his scrutiny was merely a matter of mood or whether something more serious lay beneath it.

"This thing you have lost," he said at last, "this purse or whatever it is. Does it really make such a difference?"

"No," said Carol, biting her lip. "It does not matter . . . now."

"*Bien!*" he smiled at her. "Then we have a fair exchange, since you have found the purse of Fortunatus in its stead. We shall forget trifles. A pretty and talented woman need never be annoyed over the loss of anything less than her reputation . . . and even that appears to have its consolations . . . sometimes."

"I wonder," Carol murmured, looking out of the window at the sunset gilding a tower, white and tall, a tower indelibly stamped on her mind as a part of the maze of Times Square. And Stratini seemed to read her thoughts like a book.

"Many an actress would give ten years of her future for a real past!" he reminded her. "To a press agent such a thing is a godsend. But do not take me too seriously. Stage folk are habitually maligned by the public and the pharisees. We are assumed to be unspeakable. So the dear public pays its tainted coin to look at our tainted tinsel. It feels deliciously wicked when it whispers scandal about us. Of course, it is unfair . . . but to the talented, nothing really matters but art . . . art and the box office!"

"You're wrong!" Carol retorted, ignoring his face-

tiousness. "It always matters to a woman! She may pretend it doesn't, but if she does, she's only lying to the world and trying to deceive herself. It can't help but hurt . . . to be misjudged."

Stratini saw that the girl was deeply stirred, and something akin to sympathy shone in his eyes; but only for a moment, and a frown crossed his forehead as he screwed his monocle into his eye, and paced thoughtfully about the room, his hands clasped behind him. Carol remained silent, wrapped in her thoughts, as she stared across the roofs of adjoining apartment buildings toward the western sky where the lights on Broadway were beginning to tint the clouds.

It was growing dark and Judson had lighted the candles in their silver sconces on the refectory table, a touch which transformed the room and made it softly somber, like some old-world monastery chamber. Seated upon a cloister bench, with his back to the flickering tapers, Stratini might have been some old-school diplomat or perhaps a great seigneur, the faint light glinting on his silvery hair and casting sardonic shadows across his features. A tiny, dancing candle-beam reflected its brightness in his single lens, and gave a curious squint to his eye, as he calmly regarded Carol, and stuffed a cigarette into his long holder.

"Tell me!" he demanded abruptly, as he struck a match, "just what is your little game?"

Startled, indignant, yet half terrified, Carol turned and faced him. "My game?" she repeated challengingly. "What is *yours*?"

There was defiance in her attitude, subdued fury, and a determination to match her wits against him . . . or perhaps to confess and throw herself upon his mercy if he had found what was in her bag, and meant to tax her with it.

"Hum!" he grunted, shaking his head sagely. "As I expected. You are clever and calculating, but you cannot deceive *me* so easily." For a moment he puffed

at the cigarette, fixing her with his gaze. Then his shoulders stiffened, and he accused her directly.

"Last night, you planted yourself in the entrance court deliberately. It was a trick to draw my attention . . . to intrigue me with your voice. . . ."

"It wasn't!" she cried, angry, yet hurt. "I didn't know you were here . . . how could I? I didn't even know who lived in this house . . . it was just like all the others, up and down the street." Then her tone grew bitter and her furious words came more quickly. "You say *I am calculating!* How can I know that *you* haven't some sinister purpose in this strange proceeding of incorporating me. How do I know you can do what you claim, and that I haven't signed away my very . . ."

"Enough!" he stopped her with a gesture. "Enough of the dramatics! Do I look so stupid that you hope to pull the wool over my eyes? I—Stratini—upon whom every sort and condition of female trickster has tried to practice her wiles in vain! You vaguely create the atmosphere of a past too painful to relate. Are you trying to pique my curiosity or stir my sympathy? You waste time! So I have brought you here where we can be alone . . . where you can admit the whole truth to me . . . or *I will tell it to you!*"

She gasped. Then he did know! Of course. It would be Stratini who had taken that slip from her handbag . . . perhaps it was even now in his pocket. Denial would be worse than useless—fruitlessly absurd.

"I understand," she said resignedly, hanging her head, "you need not go on. You are going to be just like the others . . . cruel, hypocritical. . . ."

"God forbid!" he broke in fervently, with a gesture of disgust.

"Oh, don't deny it! I know. Like Shylock, you will lend to me, but you want to be repaid . . . you want your *pound of flesh!*"

"Ugh!" he pretended revulsion. "I am not a canni-

bal . . . nor a butcher. But let us have not so much of the melodrama, and a little more frankness, please. There are many charming ladies who would gladly be very nice to me . . . and I have learned that many little peaches are much too green to be wholesome. You are quite safe . . . so long as you do not try to play Delilah with me. I am not in need of the services of a pretty barber, but if you do not watch out, I shall pull the whole temple down about your little ears!"

"It can do no more than crush me," she half sobbed in her disappointment, yet rage glittered through the tears which welled from her eyes.

"Now just a minute!" he restrained her. "Even Eve claimed the man was guilty . . . but do not fear . . . I will not devour your apple and leave you only the core. Yet you are quite charming . . . almost resourceful in your appeal. Were I less experienced, I might believe you innocent . . . but there must be no deception between us. I mean to know your story if I have to wring it from you!"

She threw back her head and shot him a glance of disdain, her fingers twisting her handkerchief nervously.

"This little matter of incorporation was a happy thought," he went on calculatingly. "The publicity will help . . . otherwise, it is nonsense! Perhaps I am not without sin, but I am without scruple . . . in some things. Yet Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant is my dearest friend. And because I know what I know, I will not permit you to remain in her house, nor will I consent to your association with her daughter."

He arose, with a sneering smile on his face, and dropping his monocle, took a menacing step toward Carol. "But I *will* agree to take this little sparrow under my own protecting wing. . . ."

With flashing eyes and clenched fists, Carol faced him . . . her body trembling and her heart pounding madly. There was no fear in her face . . . only fury . . . and Stratini shrugged with a mocking leer.

"You would deny me their chaperonage and suggest a more intimate, a more vile association . . . simply because you accept as fact a malicious echo of my misfortune. . . ." Her voice was agonized, and it broke helplessly. She could not go on.

"Don't lie to me!" he commanded sharply.

"I'm *not* lying!" she hurled back at him, drawing away that he might not touch her . . . that his face might not be so hideously close to hers. "Yet if I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me. What chance has a woman who has been convicted! You know she hasn't *any*! And because you know that, you offer all that I long for in exchange——"

"Shall we say for—a *kiss*?" he asked derisively, touching his lips with his finger tips to illustrate the lightness of his condition.

A tortured cry burst from her, as she watched him, fascinated—goaded beyond endurance by his expression, more studiously insulting than his words. "Oh!" she screamed, her face twitching convulsively, "I never knew before what it meant to want to *kill*!" And dashing across the room, she caught up a candlestick, massively ornate, and lethal in the maddened grasp of her fingers.

He only laughed, and adjusted his eye-glass with complacent self-control.

"Not bad," he observed, "you bluff very nicely."

"O, God!" she cried out in agony. "It would be worth eternal damnation to kill a snake like you!"

Insanely, her voice rang out in the stillness of the room, and with a movement of quick, uncontrolled passion, she hurled the heavy silver scone at his head. A crash . . . a tinkling of glass, as it smashed into a mirror . . . and then Stratini chuckled. With ever so slight a movement, he had stepped aside and stood staring at her contemptuously, his arms calmly folded.

"I could choke you with my bare hands!" Her scream startled Mrs. R.-S. as she stepped through the

door, perturbed at the sounds that had reached her in the adjoining room.

"Stratti!" she gasped in alarm, as Aline peered over her shoulder, and Bleeker and Whitney came quickly after them. But Stratini only made them an exaggerated bow.

"What on earth have you done?" Aline demanded. "I'll say you're the limit!"

Carol tried to speak, but the words would not come, and she staggered toward Mrs. R.-S. with her hands stretched out in mute appeal, seeking her protection.

"Of course you must have had some purpose," Mrs. R.-S. turned to Stratini severely, "but really the child's too nervous . . . can't you see you've broken her heart!"

"Not at all, my dear Eleanore!" Stratini twirled his mustache. "There is nothing whatever broken except a looking-glass. I merely wished to find out whether she could express intense emotion. So I deliberately insulted her . . . to see whether she could act."

He paused, and nodded approvingly. "It is quite all right . . . *she can!*"

IX.

THE tittle-tattle weeklies and the vividly yellow dailies shrieked with delight at Carol's incorporation. Veiled insinuations, intended to be witty, and factless hallucinations, spicy and utterly silly, filled column after column; editorials ranged from ridicule to righteous indignation. From the Battery to the Bronx, on the Drive and on Avenue A, the sensational story was read; and gossip carried it on, variously.

Within a week it was the topic of discussion in tea-rooms, lunch-rooms and drawing-rooms, to say nothing of those theatrical anterooms where Carol had quite lately cooled her heels. With differing emotions, the news was devoured by scrubwomen and stenographers, débutantes, dowagers and demimonde. Superior salesladies smiled; elevator and telephone operators gaped and gossiped; cloak-and-suit mannequins, milliners and manicure maids evolved a theory peculiarly their own. Broadway, sophisticated, yet surprised, scented a shrewd press agent. Its more sordid satellites suspected something else; and those who admitted themselves in society, snickered and uttered scintillating remarks. Mrs. Grundy, with uplifted nose and leveled lorgnon, sniffed scandal; a few well-bred persons perused the news without comment and lifted their eyebrows slightly. They were used to the vagaries of Baptiste Stratini and a little amazed at the approval of Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant.

Whitney Duane's secretary grew weary of telling newspaper men that Mr. Duane was engaged. Judson almost lost his poise from turning importunate sob-sisters from the Park Avenue apartment door. Baptiste Stratini threatened physical violence if a single

reporter gained admittance to his sanctum, and thus added fuel to the flames. Perhaps the most perturbed of all was the Reverend Gouverneur Duane. After pondering over his duty in the matter, he declined to write a Special Sunday Sermon on the subject, despite the enthusiastically urgent request of an influential editor who was willing to publish the minister's picture and pay a fat price for the discourse. There were reasons, the Doctor assured him regretfully—rather weighty reasons—why he felt it best to refuse; yet it grieved him sorely not to see his way to comply.

A tiny legal notice in the business columns of the *Times* started it all. In terse, conventional terms, it stated a most unconventional project, and appended an imposing list of names. That no one had ever heard of Carol Drayton only tended to make the brief announcement more intriguing, for if the world loves any type of lunatic more than it does a lover, that object of adoration is a charming Cinderella. Morons may become magnates and motormen rise to be mayors, and only the politicians pry into their personal history; but when a kitchen mechanic claims the crystal slipper, the public is eager to know the why and the wherefore. She may be frankly and frightfully wicked, or of the genus *genteel*, but she cannot hope to be a half-way heroine.

And such was the idol presented by Carol's sponsors. Interviews were denied and information was lacking, so, finding no fault with the woman, Manhattan suspected the worst. At his clubs, Gramercy Bleeker had the notice poked under his nose and found himself facetiously accused of infamous intentions. Goldfish-ladies, chorus-ladies, ladies with haughty mothers and ladies whose mothers were myths, took him to task and demanded to know how come? Accused of undue partiality, he chuckled and then evaded; grew peevish, and finally told them all to go to hell.

Aline was called to her telephone twenty times in an

hour. Purringly persuasive voices begged her to reveal the delicious secret in strictest confidence; but her mother's aloof reticence furnished the daughter's cue, and the aristocratic debby-cats who were simply dying of curiosity, found their thirst for information more difficult to quench than a lingering longing for cock-tails.

Carol, cowering inwardly, stared at the varied accounts in a sort of hopeless daze. The silly invention with which bare facts were invested proved distasteful enough, but the appearance of each new afternoon edition found her tortured lest some inquiring reporter should have stumbled upon a clew which would unearth the secret she had thus far hidden. For days she was utterly miserable. She dreaded the few steps from the street door of the apartment house to the waiting R.-S. limousine. Only the combined efforts of a special policeman and a phalanx of hallboys served to keep back the swarm of camera-men who hovered about the entrance hoping for her appearance. When she crossed a sidewalk on Fifth Avenue or entered a modiste's in the Fifties, motion-picture machines turned their cranks and the curious craned their necks. Women with pads and pencils made hasty notes of her costumes, and bewildered carriage attendants barred the way to the persistent when Carol had passed inside.

A cinema queen or a stage celebrity would have welcomed such publicity. Yet Carol shrank from it as from a plague. It galled her not to be able to glory in the limelight for which she had longed, even though it was premature and as yet unearned. The stares of the crowds made her tremble. Any pair of eyes might recognize her, and the most well-meant inquiry might unmask what she hoped to conceal. Perhaps, when success should come, what had happened would not matter . . . although Carol was far from sanguine on that score. In her philosophy, it would always matter . . .

and now, its discovery would shatter all her dreams of the future.

Of that she had not the slightest doubt. Broad in her views as was Mrs. R.-S., she could not fairly be expected to condone the truth if called upon to sponsor it. Once discovered Carol would be powerless to prevent its publication, and she would be equally helpless to frame a satisfactory answer. Each successive ordeal made her position more intolerable, and she felt that Mrs. R.-S. must resent even the present and unavoidable notoriety. Naturally, she appreciated its cause, but she could not be expected to enjoy the journalistic drivel which linked her name with that of a girl of unknown antecedents, especially since such gossip was bound to reflect upon her daughter.

Yet Aline was getting a thrill from the novel experience, and she could not understand why Carol found it distasteful. It furnished her with an unexpected relief in her restless routine and stimulated her interest in the diversions of a waning social season. Yet Aline's growing impatience with Carol's diffidence was not prompted by any lack of sympathy nor the desire to tantalize. Rather, Aline found herself completely enamored with her charming chance companion and regarded Carol with a flapper's unbounded admiration. Aline was used to being gossiped about herself and to seeing her pictures published in every sort of bizarre frock and fetching pose; hence she was at loss to fathom the other girl's apparent horror whenever she saw a lens leveled in her direction.

If Stratini knew or suspected the situation, he held his counsel, for reasons good and sufficient for his purpose. Cognizant of Aline's attempts to encourage Carol's confidence, he took no steps to halt them. And perhaps he regarded his pupil's reticence with a dubious satisfaction. If he affected a supreme contempt for the views of others, with relation to himself, he was fully aware of their bearing upon a girl such as Carol.

That she valued Aline's affections more than she did his own, was perfectly obvious and thoroughly natural. Yet the impresario knew that Carol stood in awe of him—that he personified her ambition—and that she was aware that she must pattern her conduct along the lines he laid down.

He knew the girl to be mystified by his recent attitude, when deliberate brutality had shown him her depths of emotion. And he smiled at her doubt as to how sincere he had been in explaining that little scene to the others. Now, however, he had but one ground for discontent: the anxiety lest Carol's head should be turned and that overconfidence in herself might wean her away from him. In that event, if ambition waned or wavered, the articles of incorporation would prove but empty legal phrasing, for singers cannot be made from such specifications. Danger reared its head in these newspaper stories . . . in the haze of doubt with which they surrounded the girl and made her the more appealing. The insidious pitfalls, dug by publicity, made her worth while in the eyes of the men who directed vaudeville and the screen. If she chose these easier-trod paths, and a break should ensue with Stratini, he knew that many a manager would approach her with a contract.

Consequently, Stratini encouraged extravagance in the selection of Carol's wardrobe. He wished her to feel the weight of her obligation to her incorporators . . . likewise the lure of luxurious raiment. It would not be to him alone that she would be indebted, but to Mrs. R.-S. and Aline—to Whitney and even to Bleeker. He had seen the flash of her indignation when he suggested the possibility of a personal arrangement with him. He knew that he could not hope to hold her under such conditions, for her soul had revolted when he had seared it with his suggestions. She would not stoop to do an unworthy thing, but she would strive with all that was in her to seem worthy of the regard of these

other women. And because of Carol's sponsorship, the men whom she might meet could only hope to assume the rôle of suitors. Stratini had no fear of them, even though he would not cast himself in the part of a Romeo. Yet he was fully aware of the weakness of his very strength; and the man took thought accordingly.

If Carol wished to go on, it was plain that she must retain each stockholder's regard. To do so was her only shield against the spectre-like dénouement of which he had hinted. Hence Stratini skillfully blended the ingredients of Carol's affection, pride, ambition and obligation—not to produce a *chef-d'œuvre* which he might devour, but to make Carol a morsel most tempting to the others. Yet he did not mean to efface himself completely from the picture, nor would he relax his relentless conditions one iota. Always, Carol must remember that unless she bowed to his will in the matter of study and practice, her only hope of attaining her coveted goal was a sacrifice which she could not make and face the rest of them.

Perhaps Carol sensed his purpose, but hardly very clearly. At times, she almost felt as though she might trust him implicitly and tell the whole sordid story without need of extenuation. Again she rebelled at the thought of such frank confession, and even subjugated her desire to throw herself upon the mercy of Aline. So she tried to absorb herself in the fascination of preparing for the lessons which were to begin within the next two weeks, after she had rested and adapted herself to her present surroundings. She adored the lovely, lacy things which she and Aline selected and paid for out of the corporation's fund; and subtly enough, the luxury she had attained through fairy-like magic became almost essential to her. Safeguarded and pampered, she let herself be lulled into a blissful state of false contentment. Then, as Baptiste Stratini had shrewdly foreseen, she found herself rudely awakened, late one afternoon.

The Rhinebeck-Sturdevant car was spinning through the park on the way to the Plaza, where Gramercy Bleeker waited to play host at tea. Aline was chatting away like a garrulous magpie, but Carol was staring dully through the window. The benches along the walks were filled by nursemaids, flirting with passing policemen while their charges played. Carol envied their laughter and grew more depressed as the memories conjured by the scene flashed back into her mind. She wondered whether Bleeker still thought of the purse he had found at her feet, and, what was more to the point, just what he thought of her. He had acted like a trump, but she could not expect the man to hold his place forever, if reason should prompt the wisdom of breaking his generous silence.

Circling from the park entrance, the motor paused by the *porte-cochère* of their destination, and Carol sought to recover her wandering thoughts. A gold-laced attendant opened the limousine door and Aline leaped to the sidewalk. She was spied by a gay girl in a saucy toque, who caught her by the arm, and thinking that Carol followed, the two were instantly lost in the laughing tea-throng. Carol stepped to the carpet, leading to the entrance, just as the two were swallowed up by the revolving doors. Then, transfixed by a nameless horror, she uttered a little cry, and felt as though she wished to sink through the pavement. Directly before her stood a dowdy little woman whose eyes were gaping at every detail of Carol's costume, from the tips of her sandaled, silk-shod feet to the fur which swathed her throat.

A hoarse, discordant cackle voiced the woman's contempt, and a clawlike hand in a shabby-worn glove clutched at Carol's arm with the eagerness of a vulture's hungry destroying talons.

Conscious of the comments of smartly dressed women, passing beneath the hotel canopy, Carol was keenly aware of the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant chauffeur's

outraged stare. The lackey closing the limousine door was turning to interfere, and several smart-looking men were longing to come to her aid. Of course this woman could not *know* of Carol's transformation, but what she suspected was evident, and Carol saw that she meant to make a scene. Panic-stricken, the girl could not speak for a moment, as she recalled with a sickening feeling, the fact that she had no money. Not since her incorporation had there been any need for her to carry any . . . but now, of course, it was money this woman wanted . . . the rent of the little hall room to which Carol had failed to return after her disappearance.

Now she saw how foolish her course had been; long ago she should have canceled her debt and redeemed the trunk the woman was holding. Yet she had not had the courage to go back to that dingy house. But for her negligence, this link in the chain of her fetters would be broken by now; instead, it bound her tightly to the things she wished to forget. And the lack of the meager sum required made the situation tragic. What to do she did not know . . . yet she must take some action . . . quietly and quickly. If Mrs. Acker should raise an outcry and clamor for her arrest, Carol knew the contretemps would be more than she could bear. The mere thought of a policeman nearly drove her frantic.

"Can't I come to see you to-morrow?" she begged almost piteously, and the liveried attendant stood aside, pretending not to listen.

"You can't set foot in my house to-morrow or *any* day!" the woman despised her as she appraised the worth of the car and formed a natural conclusion. "You can pay me what you owe if you like, but I run a decent place and I don't want any such women as you boarding with me!"

Flushed with mortification and stunned by the accusation, Carol held out her hands, appealing to be heard.

"Oh, please, Mrs. Acker!" she pleaded, "you *really* don't understand . . ."

"I'm not blind, am I?" the woman croaked. "This town's full of hussies like you . . ."

But her harsh voice ceased abruptly, and Carol was faintly conscious of a bluecoat's approach. She was trembling so that she dared not face the crowd, and condemned herself by her hanging head as she groped for the limousine door. Then, above the others, she heard a voice that was strangely familiar, and as she swayed, a strong arm slipped about her waist. Shrewish protests mingled with male adjurations of silence, and Carol heard a gruff command to the throng to move on.

Raising her eyes for an instant, Carol glimpsed Gramercy Bleeker, passing a roll of bills to the officer who was roughly pushing someone away. She wanted to stop him . . . to tell him not to hurt the woman . . . to explain her natural mistake and tell them all that what Mrs. Acker surmised was anything but the truth. Surely they must believe her . . . they would know who she was since her name had filled the papers! And then she remembered the thing she *couldn't* explain . . . and unless she did she could not hope to convince this woman.

But Bleeker was lifting her into the car, and as a whistle blew, she huddled herself miserably against the corner cushions. She felt the powerful motor pick up, and knew that the car was speeding into the park . . . she saw those benches again . . . remembered the man by her side . . . and now she heard him giving directions through the speaking tube. Then, something seemed to snap, and her torment was suddenly soothed as darkness enshrouded her and she drifted off into peace.

X.

THE faint light of a silk-shaded night lamp illumined Aline's features as Carol opened her eyes and the girl bent anxiously over her.

"Fair enough!" Aline exclaimed with eager satisfaction. "Milady's herself again!"

Carol smiled, wanly. "It seems as though I'm always upsetting things!" she murmured bitterly, and for answer, Aline kissed her with tender affection.

"Nonsense!" she protested. "You were overtired, that's all . . . with the fittings and all the excitement it isn't any wonder. . . . It's darned lucky that Gramercy happened along when he did. I'd gone on in with Marie Lamont, and never knew you'd fainted 'til Gramercy 'phoned from here and had me paged."

Carol was awakening to find herself on her bed . . . at least the bed that was hers by the grace of Mrs. R.-S. . . . yet now her possession of it seemed only too temporary. It had happened . . . twelve o'clock had struck . . . it was time for Cinderella to go . . . and the Prince would not follow her . . . for this Cinderella's heel was like that of Achilles. Trying to reconstruct what had happened in her interim of unconsciousness, returning memory stabbed her like a knife, and she knew that she must be frank with Aline. Only the truth in all its unpleasantness could save her from further scandal, yet it was not any easy task to make her story clear . . . perhaps it would be impossible . . . she hoped not. However, she could not hope that Bleeker would let matters drift after what he had heard . . . men didn't when they reached such a stage. Besides, she knew that she did not wish him to hold his tongue, if doing so should mean that he believed Mrs. Acker.

"Aline," she vaguely groped for words, "I've something I want to tell you . . . and I don't quite know how."

"Tell it to the Marines, old dear!" Aline laughed mischievously. "Are you in love with Gramercy, or only angry at him for proposing in the car?"

"Aline! Surely you can't imagine . . ."

"I've given up trying where Gram's concerned . . . he's such a terrible flirt!" Aline assured her. "Now, honest injun—didn't you two run away from us?"

"Why, of course not, dear," Carol denied, and would have been amused if her thoughts had not been far too serious. "Something happened . . . and Mr. Bleeker came . . . and . . . brought me here. . . . I'm afraid that's all I know." Then after a pause, she could not help adding, "Didn't *he* explain?"

"It's against his principles!" Aline replied. "He's out in the library drinking up all the Scotch and denying absolutely that he even tried to kiss you!"

Carol took sudden thought, and wondered whether, after all, this was the time to speak. It was possible that Bleeker had not heard the woman, and that if he had, he supposed the creature must be demented. He would be like that, she reasoned.

"Now, honor bright, and cross your heart!" Aline persisted. "Didn't he try to pet you a bit and didn't you two have a squabble?"

"Of course not," Carol smiled in spite of her nervousness. "He behaved like a perfect dear . . . so splendidly, in fact, that I could almost *kiss him*."

"I knew it!" Aline cried with glee. "He was altogether too fussed to be telling the truth when he said some woman had raised a row and that you'd fainted before the police could drag her off. . . ."

"Then they did arrest her?" Carol asked in dismay. It was wrong to let the old lady suffer for what she had done, cruel as her charge had been, for no doubt she

had felt herself justified, and had only been carried away by her feeling against her ex-lodger.

"Of course they carted her off in the big black wagon!" Aline laughed. "Isn't that what they always do with lady-lushes?"

"But she wasn't . . . intoxicated!" Carol insisted. "Mr. Bleeker didn't say she was, did he?"

"No," Aline admitted. "He said she was nutty or something; but what of it, since you're rested? Let's go in to Gramercy, if you're ready for tea."

Carol sat up and very slowly got to her feet. She wanted to think . . . wanted to be alone with her problem . . . yet she knew there was no time to weigh values now. She must either speak to Aline before she should see Bleeker, or else continue the rôle of her deception. And disconsolate over the turn affairs had taken, she felt that she could not endure her torture alone.

"Aline," she said, steadying herself by the foot of the bed, "you *must* wait and listen, just a moment, dear. You and your mother have been unbelievably kind, and I've repaid you with a silence that's inexcusable. . . ."

"Oh, you darling, adorable thing!" Aline exclaimed, and throwing her arms about her neck, kissed her eagerly. "I know you're going to tell me what everyone's been hinting . . . that you're a perfectly awful, *unspeakable* woman!"

Carol gasped, then smiled indulgently. It would be harder than she had imagined to disillusion Aline, yet having broached the subject, she must endure the ordeal, and she felt that she would be happier when the girl understood. It was only just that she should, and the incident of the afternoon would not go unrepeated, since dozens of people had heard what the woman said.

"Suppose," she began again, "Suppose I really were one . . .?"

"I'd hug you to death!" Aline assured her brazenly. "Oh, Carol, I've always wanted to know someone be-

yond the pale—not nicely and decently naughty, the way all of us are—but as wicked as a woman can possibly be! Wickedder, in fact.”

“Perhaps you’d be disappointed . . . when you found it was true . . . especially if you cared for her . . . a little.” Carol turned away to hide the tears in her eyes.

“Oh, rot!” snapped Aline, and put her hands on Carol’s shoulders in boyish fashion. “I don’t know what you’re hinting about, or just what terrible sin you suppose you’ve committed, but you can’t be half as bad as you think you are. Nobody is. We’re fakes—every one of us—so silly and transparent in our unholiness that even the poor old Rector sees through us!”

“I can imagine that *you are*, dear,” Carol assented, “but can’t you understand that I’d feel, oh, so much better, if you and your mother only knew what I ought to tell you?”

For a moment Aline looked at her through narrowed lids; then she shook her head decisively, and, lighting a cigarette, shrugged her slender, immature shoulders.

“Look here, Carol Drayton!” she said a little harshly. “If you’re going to play with our crowd, you’ve got to run true to form. I don’t know what you’ve done and I don’t care a *damn*. I suppose I’m not really bad . . . I’m just brazen . . . and willing to do almost anything that I shouldn’t—if I thought I’d get a thrill out of it. If I’m good, it’s because I haven’t the *guts* to be bad—which very inelegant expression is a favorite of Stratini’s—and what I say of myself is his opinion of me. So there!”

“But you don’t quite understand,” Carol persisted, a little shocked at the other’s frank appraisal of the fault she assumed as her own.

“Oh, yes, I do!” Aline tossed her head. “Do you think I don’t imagine the reason men stare at my legs . . . why they feed me cocktails and ask me to drive

out to dinner at Indianbow? I'm not a baby, and I haven't any stones to throw at girls who live in glass houses and don't pull down the shades. Why, my dear, there are women in our set who're so rotten they're not fit to speak to *you*. They've been divorced and remarried so often that a naturalist couldn't figure out their family trees! And as for the rest, they're so hopeless that Doctor Duane's given up trying to save their souls, and actually toadies to them."

"You're a dear, Aline!" Carol declared with emotion, "but I'm afraid the omissions of others won't help to purge my conscience."

"Nonsense!" Aline pressed her hand. "Consciences are obsolete . . . besides, you mustn't tell me my idol's feet are of clay! Carol, you've simply *got* to be wicked! If you don't I shan't like you a little bit . . . and besides, I'm getting thirsty, and if we wait any longer, Gram'll have drunk up everything and be all potted again!"

In her present mood it was useless to say anything more, yet in spite of her happiness over Aline's undoubted affection, Carol was loath to join Bleeker without bringing up the subject Aline had banned.

"Would you mind very much," she suggested, a bit timidly, "if I stay here while you two . . ."

"I would!" Aline slipped her arm through hers, and led her toward the door. "You're not going to mope any longer and hide your light under a bushel! Gramercy will *worship* you when he finds out that you're wicked. . . ."

Although the tone was one of unmistakable banter, the remark itself made Carol wince. No doubt Bleeker already believed enough, and the halo of unhallowedness which Aline proposed to place upon her brow would hardly add any luster or lure to her reputation. In any event, she would have to talk plainly to Bleeker; then he would be free to speak or not as he chose. At least she would be no longer indebted to him,

when she freed him from any fancied obligation to her; and to keep him in his present status was manifestly unfair. She would ask him to go to the precinct station and secure Mrs. Acker's release; then, if he liked, he might hear them both and draw his own conclusions.

So, reluctantly, she arranged her hair and gave a touch to her frock, but she felt in no mood to resort to lipstick or powder puff. And, Eve-like, Aline recognized the symptoms. Obviously, her efforts to divert Carol from whatever preyed upon her mind had failed utterly. The knowledge sent a wave of generous emotion surging through her veins, and, throwing her arms about Carol, she hugged her intensely, murmuring a flood of terms of unfeigned girlish devotion.

"Please don't think I'm a brainless fool!" she pleaded earnestly, "and remember that no matter *what* you've done—you're just *dear you* to me!"

Carol could not keep back her tears, but she brushed them away almost guiltily as the two turned into the hall and walked slowly toward the library. Then, to her amazement, Aline threw open the door, and drew herself up like a little grenadier.

"Mademoiselle Carol Drayton, milord!" she mocked the butler's tone. And then, with an elfin twinkle in her eyes, she demanded that the two make up and behave like proper children until she returned.

Carol gave a little gasp as Aline disappeared, and for a moment stood hesitant on the threshold. Slowly, Bleeker put down the decanter from which he was helping himself. Carol thought his face was a trifle flushed and his eyes seemed heavy and weary, yet solicitude was apparent in the questioning glance he gave her.

"Top-side again?" he asked with a pleasant smile. "Didn't know what was best to do, so I thought I'd bring you home."

"Thank you," said Carol simply, and sank down on the davenport, hardly knowing what to say now that the moment had come. Intently she studied the point

of her slipper and twisted her handkerchief nervously as Bleeker watched the play of the lights on her dark hair.

"I didn't make any charges against that woman," he modulated his tone and glanced toward the door. "Thought maybe you'd rather not appear against her. . . ."

"Oh!" Carol gasped, and turned to him gratefully. "You can't know how grateful I am! I hope the officer let her go . . . that there won't be any trouble. . . ."

"Not a chance!" he assured her, and lighted a cigarette to conceal his own all too apparent and growing perturbation. "There was no one around who counted . . . no one who knew who you were . . . and the cops and the boys at the Plaza are patron saints of mine. They're the famous little angels who look out for drunken fools, and I keep them nice and friendly by slipping them *backsheesh*!"

Carol declined a cigarette, and bit her lip indecisively. Then she resolved to take the plunge and have it done. "But surely *you* heard what the woman said?" she put to him bluntly.

"Rot, of course!" he shrugged. "She ought to be put in a padded cell . . . and she can be if you wish . . . but in view of the papers and you're being here, I thought perhaps it might be best to overlook the whole thing. Mind if I take a drink?"

"Naturally not," said Carol. "But don't you think it's time you and I were more frank . . . time that I told you how much all you've done has meant to me?"

"Don't get you!" he tried to pretend. "What have I done *now*?"

"Surely you understand exactly what I mean," Carol insisted, making him meet her eyes. "You were perfectly splendid about that handbag. . . ."

"So it *was* yours!" he laughed. "Well, no one's the wiser and it's rather fun to have a secret between us. Besides, that business was all my fault. . . ."

"It wasn't!" she objected. "Of course you didn't know you'd put it in your pocket." Then she added meaningly, "I suppose you don't know now *precisely* what was in it?"

Her questioning inflection and her emphasis struck him as peculiar, and his answering look confessed his ignorance of her inference. "You mean there *was* something in it . . . something rather special?" he asked in mild surprise. "I might have known that when Whitney produced it at tea . . . and your manner confirmed my suspicion that you were the girl in the park."

"Didn't you even wonder why I denied that the bag was mine?" she searched him.

"No . . . and yes," he admitted. "I thought perhaps it was because of me . . . I was hardly myself that night . . . and I thought there might have been something . . . well something I'd said or done . . ."

"There wasn't!" she told him. "But when Whitney showed me the purse, the thing I was worried about was gone."

"Awkward?" He raised his eyebrows. "You'd rather Whit or Stratti shouldn't see it? Well, I wouldn't worry then . . . they'd have been certain to mention anything if they'd found it."

She did not seem at all certain that such would be the case, and he read the doubt which flashed across her features. Silently he puffed at his cigarette, and then drained his glass, taking a step toward her and regarding Carol with kindly concern. "Did it have . . . anything to do with that woman's chatter this afternoon?"

"In a way," she admitted. . . .

"And it bothers you like the devil!" he nodded regretfully. "Don't let it! Take what the gods give you and chuck the worry."

"Can you advise that?" she asked, uncertainly. "You would hardly sympathize with my continuing to

deceive Mrs. R.-S. and Aline, after all they've done for me . . . after what you heard!"

"I don't believe all I hear," he smiled at her, his desire to be helpful plainly evident. "I don't know what you imagine I'm thinking of you . . . but you must be wrong."

"Then what *do* you think?" she wondered.

"I think you're the most charming idiot I've known in ages!" he appraised her with a chuckle, not unkind, yet frankly amused.

"Then you blame me for electing to sail under false colors?" she put to him directly. "Suppose I tell you that what you heard was true?"

"If you do I shall think you're even *more* idiotic!" he answered thoughtfully. "Why should you . . . even if it is so? I know I'm a rum sort of parson to preach to a pretty woman, but I'm rather a connoisseur of the chaste as well as the chased. I know most of the bad points of the good ones, and all of the good points of the bad ones . . . and I've found blue ribbon fillies in both classes. . . ."

"Not running in harness together!" she reminded him.

"Oh, come!" he protested. "I'm not pretending to judge you or trying to put you over the jumps . . . but I'll say you're a thoroughbred, and I hope you're not going to shy at a little advice."

"That, I'm afraid, will depend upon what you suggest," Carol waited.

"Keep quiet!" he proposed. "The Sphinx was erected in memory of the only woman the world ever knew to hold her tongue. She may have outvamped Cleopatra, but no one has ever whispered the slightest scandal concerning the lady. Just because she kept her own counsel, the world looks upon her as wise, and all the mummies who might have spilled the beans are sound asleep in their coffins in our leading museums."

"But the mummies who know about *me* are very

much alive!" Carol said slowly. "And the memory that will never die is a *part* of me."

"Cherish it!" he exclaimed with a touch of sarcastic indifference, "but lay it away in lavender 'til it's old enough to be worth while. Some day you can trot it out and publish the story broadcast. Your press agent will turn hand-springs of delight!"

"Stratini might offer that as a solution," she told him bluntly, "but he would not permit me to stay here living a lie."

"Why not?" he shrugged. "Don't we all live lies? Why, even Aline's a worse little liar than you. You're merely trying to hide something you're sorry you did . . . Aline, like the rest of the flappers, is trying to make us believe she's the sort of girl she wouldn't dare to be. Wherefore, as our dear friend the Rector would say, her example is more reprehensible than yours."

"You're begging the question," she stopped him; "besides, I won't let you criticize Aline."

"I'm not trying to!" he denied with fervor. "I'm keen about Aline, and I'd marry her to-morrow if she'd have me. Only I can't help laughing when I think how she'd love to change places with you. Why, Aline would simply glory in the loss of her reputation . . . if it didn't necessitate the sacrifice of her virtue!"

"That's not fair!" Carol protested, suspicious of his loquaciousness and doubtful of his sincerity; but as he went on his manner and tone carried complete conviction.

"Now see here!" he argued gently. "You're being blamed for something that isn't your fault . . . and if you've made a mistake, you're trying to play square now. Neither a man nor a woman can ask any more than that. If you were rotten at heart you wouldn't have done as you did on the steps of the Plaza. A girl like that would have brazened it through . . . but you caved in completely."

"I couldn't help it!" she cried and turned away.

"Which only proves my case!" he said triumphantly. "Why, even Aline would have reveled in such an encounter! She'd have bawled out the old woman like a furious fishwife, safe in the knowledge that a daughter of Cræsus may be viewed with suspicion but not with contempt."

"Aline would have been safe in a sounder sense of security!" Carol shook her head.

"Flapper fallacy!" he insisted. "Most of 'em are on the level, but they're not level-headed. They want to play the game and they won't abide by the rules. Men laugh at 'em but they don't like it. Any man who's a man will forgive a woman who isn't quite all she feels she ought to be . . . but he's no use for the girl who pretends to be all that she's not."

"A comforting philosophy . . . but dangerous," she declined to acquiesce.

"Confound it!" he burst out, "You're hopeless! Can't you see what I'm driving at? What you've *done* doesn't make any difference about your staying here . . . it's what you *can* do for Aline. Hang it all, Carol Drayton, that kid needs you, needs you like the devil! She's crazy about you, and wherever you lead she'll follow. If you quit cold she'll regard you as a martyr and emulate your weakness . . . but if you keep quiet and carry on, you'll carry Aline with you. . . ."

"I wonder where?" she broke in pensively.

"Where ignorance isn't mistaken for bliss and the wise are not thought foolish!" he said with a smile. "Because you've learned a lesson or two, you *must* know I'm right, old dear. By helping Aline, you'll help yourself—and the devil take old Mrs. Grundy! Just give it a thought and see if you don't agree with me. I'll bet you a bid to my wedding it works out the way it should!"

XI.

IF the other incorporators were more or less interested in the safety of Carol's soul, Stratini was only concerned with her body, her voice and her mind. And with the launching of the routine the impresario had devised, Carol realized his prophecy that her soul would not be her own.

No candidate for prize ring laurels was ever trained more severely and painstakingly from a purely physical standpoint. From the prescribed moment of her awakening to the precise time when she retired, exercises and inhibitions were the order of her day. Beginning with a cold shower and ending with a warm bath, each busily occupied hour brought its means of making her more robust, its safeguards against surplus flesh, and its guarantees of a graceful carriage. In fact she was taught to make each movement with studied, cadenced precision . . . yet affectation was carefully guarded against. Canters, hikes, motor rides and fencing interspersed strenuous sessions in a private gymnasium. Weights, dumb-bells, rowing machines and parallel bars helped to expand her chest, and to make more shapely her charming contours. Gargles, massages and minutely supervised practice strengthened her throat and enriched her mellifluous tones.

Already Stratini was in ecstasies over the exceptional range of her voice, not excelled, he boasted, by the marvelous powers of the great Calvé herself. From deepest contralto to sweetest and highest soprano, seemed but an effortless sweep to Carol, and Stratini raved with delight as he taught her the principles of Italian *bel canto*. "A Galli, a Calvé, a Garden!" he would murmur to himself. "Yet there is one thing lacking . . . and that I shall supply. She has not yet

suffered—enough . . . but that is a simple matter. Once she falls in love and breaks her heart . . . then, by the great God of Heaven, she'll *sing!*”

Yet such views he kept to himself. Not insensible to the value of mild encouragement and moderate praise, he was equally lavish with ridicule and remonstrance. Had not the immortal Caruso been maddened into achievement by the supercilious scorn of a shrewd Neapolitan choir-master? It was amusing, too, this browbeating! He liked to see her writhe under his studiedly cruel witticisms—thrusts which made her open wounds quiver . . . and at times, Stratini would strike more deeply than he knew. His tantrums would drive her to tears, and when he had goaded her into a terrible rage, he would pace up and down the room and shake his sides with mirth.

“Ah, *bien!*” he would cry and clap his hands. “You hate me . . . that is *good!* Now we shall do better, *n'est-ce-pas?* . . . Come! . . . Twenty times more that phrase . . . until we have it . . . *so!* . . . *Si!* that is right. . . . Bah! . . . now you are wrong . . . terrible . . . *impossible!* Once more! . . . La, la, la! . . . not bad . . . but for *you* such singing will not do! Would you make a monkey of *me?*”

Breakfasts were carefully supervised with respect to calories, and luncheons and dinners were fixed and frugal feasts. Her afternoons were as busy as her active mornings, and her evenings were devoted to reading and sleep. There were hours at the piano, practice with Stratini, the study of rôles and the learning of languages, not unvaried by wisely selected amusements. The opera, of course, was ended for the season, as were the splendid concerts of the Philharmonic, yet Carol heard worth while performances at Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan. She studied the artistes commended by her instructor, and longed for more personal contact with these great ones; but this Stratini strictly forbade.

"You will soon grow impossible enough without learning their tricks of temper!" he told her laughingly; yet wise in his chosen field, he knew whereof he spoke. "Grown babies who would be helpless without their wet-nurses!" he scoffed. "It is not *they* who are great, but we patient ones who make them so! By yourself, you are a nobody, a nothing! With *me*—you can be anybody you like! But do not forget that it is Stratini and not the insignificant Carol Drayton who will make the world shout *Bravo!* when you step upon the stage. Your voice is like a violin—sweet only when it is played by a maestro. I am the musician . . . you the instrument. Take care I do not *smash* you one of these days!"

Naturally, under Stratini's régime, Carol saw little of Mrs. R.-S. and even less of Aline. Post-Lenten festivities freed the wings of the flappers, carefully clipped by Doctor Duane during the forty-day season when his preachments reigned supreme. And rather than witness the swing of the social pendulum to the other extreme, the worthy Rector had taken himself abroad to discourse of things canonical with a dignified Hertfordshire dean.

"Life's becoming a round of riots!" Aline confided to Carol, "and I simply don't see how the hooch can hold out at the rate we're lapping it up!"

Carol smiled and thought of Bleeker . . . of what he had said in the library that late afternoon, after her encounter in front of the Plaza. Sometimes she wondered how earnest the man had been, and just how helpful her presence was to Aline. Certainly, the two were hardly ever together, for Stratini had frowned severely at the suggestion of Carol's participation in the whirl which completely occupied the time of the piquant Aline. Nor did Carol see much of Bleeker, and if she had had time to be lonely, she felt that she would have missed his curious, comforting counsel.

At times she needed it, busy as she was kept, and

she longed to unburden her weary mind of the things which still tortured her. For days after the scene with Mrs. Acker, she had feared each ring of the telephone, each trip that Judson made to the apartment door. She felt like an impostor in keeping the silence enjoined by Bleeker, but gradually that uneasiness lulled itself and smoldered deep in her heart. There were no echoes of the landlady's accusation, and the newspapers had ceased their flamboyant mention of the incorporation that had only proved to be a mild three-day sensation. In fact, if Carol chose to apply herself to her work and stifle her personal feelings, she needed to have no care save the effort to please Stratini.

And not only did it elate her to strive to accomplish that, but the doing of it afforded her a blessed relief. The sense of achievement was stimulating. It spurred her on to greater endeavor, and she could not help taking a deep satisfaction in the progress she knew she was making. The mistakes of her earlier training were all too apparent now, and each new turn in Stratini's methods pointed a readily followed road to mastery of the gift which lay in her throat. Despite his grinding, she was filled with gratitude as she realized the results his skill and his domination had accomplished in even so short a time. And while he did not tell her so, Stratini was amazed at her pliability and the development his wizardry was bringing about.

The impresario sensed the first fruits of victory when he knew that Carol would now never willingly swerve from her purpose. With the plaudits of the public almost within reach, with the twinkle of the footlights and the glitter of great audiences beckoning to her, he was certain that she would prove more and more moldable as time went on. With an amused smile he would watch her during her periods of rest, listening spellbound to the records of women whose voices the disc had already preserved for posterity. Not that she was merely thrilled by their trills and cadenzas, but

because she could imagine the day when *her* voice would sound in millions of homes at the needle's touch. She was in the grip of ambition, in all of its vain longing, its selfishness and its personal adoration. Other temptations were puny . . . almost nothing mattered . . . since sentiment did not seem to have deeply touched her as yet.

Carol likewise realized the subtle change in herself. She no longer felt meekly humble, and she could have been happy in the supremest sense of joyous emotion, but for the one regret which rankled deep down within her. In some moods she tried to laugh at her puritanism. After all, as Aline had said, there were countless other women who had ventured farther and fared better than she. She wanted to let the dead past remain dead, and banish her ghosts from the feast; yet somehow she realized that she must be made of sterner stuff than those who could live as they liked to-day, and forget about it to-morrow.

And that was where the hurt came. She had *not* lived as she liked, and yet she must pay the piper for a dance she had not enjoyed! Well, the piper might wait—for the present. If he dunned her, that would be different; but if she continued her fight, he would not find her bankrupt when he came to collect. She could laugh in the fellow's face, and the world would laugh at him with her, once her name flared forth from the operative bills. Yet despite this marked difference in her attitude, there was no diminution in her regard for Mrs. R.-S. and Aline. On the contrary, she was striving to earn their commendation, to possess the right to be with them always . . . and although she did not realize the truth . . . she was battling to retain a place in the pleasant environment to which she had been admitted by the merest chance. But like all somewhat superstitious geniuses, she began to laugh at the idea of luck, and attributed her good fortune to the workings of Fate. Born to succeed, she could not fail,

and she *would* not! She could not be robbed of the gift that was hers, and now that she knew how to use it, those who sought to stand in her way would receive short shrift.

Yet Carol reckoned without herself in coming to this conclusion, and her pride was due for a cropper just around the corner. It came on the afternoon when she went alone to Dorland's, booted and spurred, and eager to leap to the saddle. Familiar with horses since childhood, when she had ridden ranch-fashion, her brief, swift canters were the pleasantest part of her day. At first, Stratini had ruled that she engage an instructor—to show her the proper seat and point out the capers considered improper for riders in Central Park. But after a few lessons, this part of the program was almost the only one Carol pursued alone.

She had walked from the Park Avenue apartment, and her cheeks were aglow as she entered the riding academy, swinging her crop and looking the picture of health. A groom had her mount ready in the tan-bark ring, and just as Carol appeared, another horse was led out for a man who stood smoking a cigarette by the gallery steps. It was Whitney Duane, and his features lighted up in satisfaction as he caught a glimpse of Carol in a pier-glass even before she saw him.

"Greetings!" he called and stamped out his cigarette in the turf. "At last I've outwitted the ogre and captured the princess!"

Carol laughed and gave him her hand with a frank, friendly grip. "Oh, it isn't so bad as that, I hope," she protested reprovingly. "Surely I'm permitted to ride with one of my stockholders."

"But Stratini forbids you to fall in love!" he teased as he patted her horse's nose.

"Vain creature!" Carol accused him. "One might think you were irresistible!"

"Unfortunately I'm not," he shook his head. "I'm

too old to attract the matrons and not old enough to appeal to the *débutantes*."

"Then I ought to be safe," Carol said, as the groom held her stirrup, and she swung into the saddle. "I'll race you to the reservoir. . . ."

"Right!" he agreed, and their horses' hoofs clattered out on the asphalt, trotting toward the entrance which gave on the bridle path.

"Do you know," she confided, sitting her saddle with graceful abandon, "my rides are the only moments when I really feel that I'm free. The rest of the time I might as well be a Circassian slave, guarded by eunuchs and pampered by ayahs . . . awaiting the Sultan's approach!"

"It's hardly that, is it?" he asked, as they descended into the leafy dell, away from the motor roads. "You don't mean that you're unhappy . . . in your work?"

"Of course not!" she denied; yet now she realized that she had resented the studied aloofness with which Whitney had regarded her from the first. Perhaps his very suggestion of safeguarding her good name by means of the incorporation had been prompted by a desire to protect her sponsors rather than to make *her* feel less dependent upon their generosity. She realized, too, that this man was one of those whose money was making her future possible. And she could not help voicing the feeling which suddenly twitted her temper.

"I suppose," she said rather nastily, "I owe you a sort of account of what I've been doing . . . since you've invested your money in me."

"Oh, please!" he protested, flushing furiously. "You mustn't. . . ."

But her tiny spurs startled her mount and she was off like an arrow before he could turn his horse's gait to a gallop. Like a mischievous elf eluding a wicked pursuer, she urged her splendid beast to greater speed, tapping its flanks incessantly with the tip of her crop. Snorting and springing forward, Whitney's animal set

himself to the chase, and had gained half the distance when Carol disappeared beneath the natural bridge and faded away around the curve which carried on to their goal.

Emerging onto the higher path, he saw the cloud of dust her fleet little mount's hoofs scattered derisively, and he spurred on to catch up with her before she should gain the circle rounding the artificial lake. But a group of equestriennes, turning back, barred his progress, and he had to rein in to let them pass; so Carol was almost out of sight before Whitney could give his horse its head again. He had not liked that remark of hers—not because of its tone alone, but because of what it implied—a sense of resentment against Stratini's restrictions. She was *not* a slave, of course, and she did not need to explain anything to Whitney. In fact, he detested the thought that Carol even considered the sum he had paid into her company's fund. Yet he supposed it was only natural . . . a woman like that could not relish a comparatively strange man's helping to finance her tuition . . . and, in a way, he was rather glad she had such scruples. God knew there were plenty who *hadn't* . . . some of them riding nearby . . . women whose horses were but a part of *ménages* maintained by men whose views were far different from his.

He'd mention the matter when he overtook Carol, he thought, as he rounded the turn and headed toward the south, close to Fifth Avenue. He noticed his uncle's house across the way, windows boarded and gloomier than when the Rector was home. And Whitney found himself glad that Doctor Duane had sailed. He meant to see this thing through, to do all in his power to give this girl her chance, and he knew all too well what his uncle's viewpoint would be. Damn it! Why did decent people always discredit a man's purpose in wanting to do something for a pretty woman?

It wasn't fair . . . it was rotten! . . . but it was true.

Of course the dominie would hold his tongue, since Mrs. R.-S. was a party to the bargain; he couldn't well do otherwise and not get himself laughed at, but Whitney knew that the Rector's return would mean a tongue-lashing for him. Not that he cared; he was fond of his uncle and the old gentleman's zeal rather aroused his admiration when it didn't amuse him; but he did not desire a rift in the amicable relations of the Duanes. Sort of *noblesse oblige* . . . then, too, his uncle was so habitually in print that a break between them would surely drift into the papers. That would mean more unpleasantness for Carol. Confound it! If the old man went after her, Whitney would certainly give him a bit of his mind.

Then he overtook the victor of the race—not because she meant that he should, but because a traffic policeman had smilingly lifted his finger at her. "They can't all ride like you, Miss," the officer was saying as Whitney came along, "and it isn't safe to let you go so fast."

He touched his cap to Whitney, and the two cantered off in silence, neither quite knowing how to revert to their previous topic. Carol, a little ashamed, and fearing that she had hurt him, was reluctant even to apologize. Whitney, considerate and perplexed, would have tried to forget the matter if he had not wished to disabuse her mind. And, sensing the situation, their horses put their heads together, nodding sagely, and deciding to walk neck and neck, in order better to listen to what might soon be said.

"I suppose I'm very ungrateful," Carol stammered at last, but her downcast eyes would not meet her companion's.

"Of course you're not," he broke in sincerely. "Stratini says you're wonderful, and I'm sure we're all glad of the chance to help him help you. . . ."

"And he *is* helping me . . . marvelously!" she praised with sudden spirit. "I've never imagined a man could perform such a miracle. I hardly *know* myself . . . I can't believe it's I when I hear the notes he coaxes from my throat. If it wasn't for the joy of it, there are times when I feel that I couldn't go on."

"Oh, come!" he protested. "Discouragement is only natural. Everyone's blue now and then; but think of the triumphs later . . . the days when we'll all be proud to sit in our boxes and listen, and rejoice that the little we've had the chance to do has aided in training a voice to sing so sweetly. . . ."

"It *isn't* a little—all that you're doing!" she insisted earnestly. "It is everything! And perhaps the greatest thing of all, I owe to you. That's why I was perfectly horrid in what I said just now."

"If you said something you didn't mean . . . I guess I didn't catch it . . ." he lied lamely.

"Oh, yes, you did!" she exclaimed, impatient with him. "Please don't treat me like a child for whom you're sorry! You're all that way . . . willing to overlook and forgive . . . to accept me without asking questions . . . that is, all but Stratini . . ."

"And by that you mean . . . just what?" he asked, a trifle uneasily.

"By that I mean that I'm a *fool*!" she reproached herself bitterly. "I've broached a subject I can't discuss . . . not with any of you . . . yet, sometimes, I wish I might."

"Then why don't you?" he asked quietly.

"I can't."

"Would you really like to?"

She nodded.

"I think you'd find me sympathetic," he urged gently. "And of course, whatever you tell me would be *entre nous*."

She smiled . . . a bitter expression that hardened

the lines of her mouth . . . and the nervous jerk she gave to the bit annoyed her mount.

"Tell me something!" she demanded suddenly, turning in her saddle and facing him squarely. "Just why did you suggest this unique idea of making a corporation of me?"

They were back on the bridle path again, far down under the wall of the street above, and he drew his horse a little closer to the side of hers, so that their boots squeaked as the leather touched, and his spur jangled against hers.

"You mean, honestly?" he asked, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

"Naturally!" she replied impatiently, but she did not turn her horse from his side.

"There were two reasons," he told her at last, "and it's a little hard to divorce one from the other; but perhaps I can make that clear to you."

For a moment they rode on in silence, and the horses, blinking their eyes, wagged their heads and swished their tails like two mechanical toys.

"So far as you are concerned," he went on at last, "I guess it came about because of my frame of mind . . . and I rather suspect that my uncle had something to do with it. . . ."

"You mean you thought that the Rector wouldn't approve if I'd remained without some such arrangement?"

He nodded. "You don't know my uncle, and I'm rather glad you don't. It requires a contented mind to bear with him . . . yet he's doing the best he knows how. However, he'd just been horrified by a number of things that Stratti and Aline had done to tease him. Then Gram Bleeker got potted and made a fool of himself, and I was elected to cart him home. Well, on the way, I got to thinking that a lot of things aren't fair. Much as he disapproved, the poor dominie couldn't flay them too hard. Stratti makes his own

laws . . . and some of them are excellent; Aline does as she pleases, because she's above suspicion . . . or at least, she thinks she is. Bleeker, because of his family and what's left of his money, is going to hell very pleasantly in spite of everybody. . . ."

"*You're* not a minister, are you?" Carol could not help asking, humorous little wrinkles gathering close to her eyes.

"No . . . and I'm not moralizing," Whitney smiled. What I'm getting at is that no matter what some of us do, we're immune . . . our position and our fortunes make us so. Maybe we've a right to do as we like, and maybe we haven't. I don't know . . . don't know that I care . . . but you must admit that with others . . . especially with women . . . certain conventions *must* be observed."

"They're *not*—always," Carol reminded him.

"Then beggars ride . . . usually to their fall," he observed, as two smartly togged women rode by. "But when you came in, and I saw Stratini's interest, I pictured what the papers would say if he made you his protégé. Stratti's true blue to the core . . . but a lot of his little songbirds mate entirely too often . . . and, while thinking people pet them, they don't as a rule take them into the heart of the family circle."

"Are you preparing to place *me* outside that magic ring?" Carol asked, cuttingly.

"You know I'm not!" he defended. "I did what I did to give you a standing inside it . . . to silence tongues that only wag to stir up trouble. I saw that you didn't trust us . . . and I couldn't blame you . . . then the thought of incorporation flashed across my mind."

"As a sort of flaming sword between me and Stratini?" she said sarcastically; "to safeguard me against my own weakness, my undoubted willingness to yield to temptation!"

Her eyes were flashing, and the gloved fist that held

the reins, clenched them tighter. She wanted to strike him across the cheek with her riding whip! And then her arm fell limp at her side. What a fool she was not to appreciate the wonderful thing he had done . . . the thoughtfulness that she was on the brink of hating him for.

And now he countered by granting that she was not entirely wrong in her surmise. "There's another side of it," he said. "The one you mentioned. Take Bleeker and myself, for instance. We've had everything . . . always. No school has been closed to us . . . even in the public one of experience, we could take the full course. If we couldn't be what we wanted to be, there was no excuse for us. We'd the money to further our aims, and were free to choose what vocations we liked. Yet I've seen lots and lots of men, whose gifts were greater than ours, barred from the places they deserved because they couldn't afford to go on with the work they loved."

"You overlook those who succeed in spite of their handicaps," she objected. "Stratini came from nothing . . . at least from the last of an impoverished noble line."

"Which is perhaps a worse start than springing from peasant stock!" Whitney admitted. "But Stratini, like all self-made men, believes in struggle . . . in suffering . . . recommends them as a sort of panacea for everything. As far as a man's concerned, perhaps he's right . . . but for a woman, it's hard to wade through the mud without smirching her skirts."

"You believe it's impossible?" she tested him.

"Practically," he answered frankly. "In a career where success must be captured early, before beauty fades and worry brings wrinkles, *some* compromise is almost essential . . . thanks to the rotten viewpoint of a cynical world. But all that's only the basis of my theory . . . the rest is a personal hobby, a venture I've always wanted to try. . . ."

"A sort of experiment . . . in which *I'm* the subject?"

"In which you seem to be the *proof* that my diagnosis of the trouble is sound," he smiled. "I formed the company—you're making good—and the investment's going to pay us all dividends in satisfaction as well as in currency. What could be fairer than that?"

"You're laughing at me!" she chided . . . irritably.

"I'm not. Let me prove it. I've always thought that most women pay too much to attain their ambitions. Maybe they marry men they don't love . . . and maybe they pay in some other way. I'm speaking of women who *must* have some capital to gain their ends . . . as in your case, for example. Now, granted a girl has the talent and the ambition . . . the willingness to work . . . and the desire to remain unsullied. How is she going to go about it . . . remembering, as I say . . . that she simply must have money?"

"I think," said Carol slowly, "I'm beginning to understand."

"Of course you are," he told her. "The sum we've all subscribed was essential, but it was only a portion of what you needed to come through clean. Your position with Mrs. R.-S. and Aline makes up the deficit. And what's the result? You'll be hailed as a great diva before you're thirty . . . you'll pay back the cost of your training out of your subsequent earnings, and there won't be a single soul . . . not even my dear, doubting uncle . . . who can hint the slightest scandal concerning you."

They had come to the end of the path and the horses had stopped of their own accord, forgotten by their riders. A park guard stared at the two, and smiled in his sleeve. Then he coughed to suggest that they'd better be moving. Traffic regulations forbade blocking the way. Without speaking, Carol turned

her horse, and Whitney's followed as she cantered thoughtfully away.

Along where the road sinks between mossy banks and the trees overarch the path, his mount drew close to Carol's, and she turned to him with a wondering look in her serious eyes.

"Just why did you do this for *me*?" she asked him softly.

Half hesitating, he bowed his head as he tried to frame a reply; then impulsively, he threw his arm about her and drew her to him hungrily. "Because . . . !"

But her lithe form stiffened, and her crop cracked as she struck him, just as she had been tempted to do on the East Drive. "Because what you've said isn't true!" she cried out in her fury, and the startled horses began to prance about nervously, shocked at the sudden rift between the two. "You only wanted to chain me legally—with your careful nonsense about incorporation . . . to bind *me* without binding yourself! You wanted to give me a social status which would protect you in your little scheme. At least Stratini was frank in what he proposed, and Gramercy does not pose as my social mentor. But you want me to cheat the others—to accept the sponsorship of Mrs. R.-S. and Aline, so that your relations with me may seem respectable!"

Her face was white and her nostrils quivered as she lost all control of herself, and Whitney, too dazed to intervene, sat his saddle silently. "Oh, you canting, kindly reformer!" she taunted vehemently. "Like uncle, like nephew, naturally! You're so *damned* good that you must even sin sanctimoniously!"

Then, as her eyes filled with burning tears, and her body trembled with uncontrolled emotion, she dug her spurs into her horse's flanks and left him alone and disconsolate on the deserted road. It was more than she could bear—each of them doubting and preying—characteristically. But this revelation of Whitney dis-

gusted her utterly. Masking his stalking with virtue, he chose to play the more subtle game in the guise of a kindly protector!

"*Damn* their protection!" she cried aloud in her anguish, unconscious of the stares of passing equestriennes and the doubts of mounted policemen. "I'll take every scrap that they give me, and put myself on a pinnacle from which even they can't pull me! . . .

. . . "And in return, I'll give them . . . *literally nothing at all!*" Her laugh rang out through the trees.

BOOK TWO

I.

WITH the removal of the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant household from Park Avenue to Newport, Carol grew vaguely conscious of a mental metamorphosis which startled her at first. Conscience seemed to have given way to a cold, calculating contempt. Nothing which had transpired prior to her ride with Whitney seemed to matter. She even regarded that incident as one to regret and forget rather than something to hide and brood about. Yet she did not hold herself blameless for giving way to her temper.

Perhaps she had been wrong in judging the man. . . . Aline would not have regarded his attempt at saddle-petting as a heinous sin . . . and possibly Whitney had meant no more than that. But with Aline, the situation was different. Whitney's caresses could offer her no affront; to Carol, his actions could signify little else. That Whitney could think he loved her was absurd, and somehow, all he had said did not ring true. No great spirit of camaraderie had sprung up between them; although, if anything, her attitude toward him was one of admiration . . . tinged with disappointment. She told herself she preferred the bald brazenness of theatrical offices . . . the uncamouflaged proposition of Stratini . . . the indulgent nonchalance of Bleeker. Whitney's attitude was all too reminiscent of hypocritical charges, resulting in cruelest suffering.

Yet in her first contemplation of the misery their fracas had occasioned, Carol determined to write him a full confession. Alone in her room, still booted and

spurred, she had dashed off page after page of contrite apology. Then, in rapid succession, her mood altered from one of self-reproach and self-abnegation to a spirit of indignation . . . of contemptuous condemnation. In the end she burned each effort at the open grate of her boudoir and resolved completely to dismiss the matter from her mind.

Whitney's subsequent silence embittered her. The day after their quarrel he slipped away to Pinehurst, and Carol sought forgetfulness in her studies. If Stratini sensed the situation, he uttered never a word, and Mrs. R.-S. and Aline were equally unobservant and silent. Why not? Unless Whitney brought up the subject, the others would never suspect what had transpired between them. And needless to say, Whitney would hold his peace.

So Carol's viewpoint gradually changed. Not once did she relax her reserve or give evidence of any abandoned independence, yet the fears which had haunted her gradually disappeared. Hardly realizing her attitude, she stifled every emotion save that of selfish ambition. She would strive and slave and sing until the laurels were hers . . . and then she would laugh at them. Yet, struggle on as she might, she secretly hated herself, and because of that very discontent, she worked all the harder.

Her painstaking efforts to please Stratini left the impresario no ground for complaint. He was as wrapped up in her progress as was Carol herself. Yet with a maestro's cunning, he divined a development which could not be due to him. Not suspecting its source, he delighted in the result of her secret suffering . . . her new spirit of defiance . . . her indomitable determination to succeed. If she desired to become a golden-throated automaton—an emotionless, melodious statue, Stratini was quite content. And because he was conscious of such a pretense on Carol's

part, he let down the bars of his rigid restriction a trifle.

In the last weeks of their stay in New York, he encouraged Carol to rest . . . to run about with Aline, and to purchase her summer wardrobe. He took her to a play himself, and urged a greater indulgence in the affairs of a fagging season. Carol shrugged and complied, with an air of *ennui* which inwardly amused him. He smiled at the ease with which she turned men's heads and aroused fresh feminine envy. She became a sort of super-flapper, an *artiste* in embryo, viewing with tolerant unconcern each new evidence of ardent masculine worship. The superficial, metallic note in Aline's make-up began to show itself in Carol's manner; and in exchange, Aline grew to be what Stratini termed "up-stage." He laughed as the two girls patterned themselves after each other's example . . . perhaps without design, or perhaps with deliberate intent. In any event it was plain that they influenced each other.

Outwardly, Carol was all he could hope. In the studio, she delighted him, and visually, the girl was growing exquisite. Her beauty might have brought her a dozen proposals, yet the impresario saw that Carol's head was not turned by such homage. And while he was conscious of a twinge of her heart, he inclined to attribute the change to self-worship. That, too, was well enough. She might adore his own handiwork as much as she liked! The moment she should prove rebellious, he would shatter the image which pleased her, and show her that she was dependent upon his whims. Then, and only then, he would give the world a singer beyond compare.

Yet Stratini did not regard himself as a Svengali. His attitude was far different . . . and *his* Trilby could sing—even without his aid . . . but what a sacrilege it would be if she turned from his tutelage! In the hands of one less skilled, her efforts would only

prove commonplace . . . while he meant to make her a mellifluous marvel. This, however, he dared not as yet confess to Carol, while the outcome of his venture still hung in the balance.

Nevertheless, when Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant was settled at Newport, Stratini's hopes arose to a higher pitch. The music room at Clifcleft was given over to him, and Carol's suite overlooked the walk by the sea. There maestro and pupil might be alone without interruption, or, when misgivings seized him, he could suggest that they mingle with the guests who arrived and departed continually. In his enthusiasm, he abandoned his plans of going abroad, and resignedly installed himself at Clifcleft for the summer.

July drifted into August, and Stratini was in the seventh heaven of satisfaction. His methods were proving themselves, and Carol's progress tickled his musical soul. For days, he would pose as a martinet, and drive his pupil relentlessly. Then he would soften and smile, and declare with the greatest good nature, that Carol had earned and must take a little more recreation. These interludes were planned with consummate shrewdness, when the guests of Mrs. R.-S. were certain to be diverting—not only to his pupil, but to himself. He chose the gayest gatherings, and made himself their life, not forgetting to see that Carol shared his activity. Week after week, he sowed the seed of social ambition, and inculcated in Carol a sense of patrician pride. Since marriage did not attract her as yet, she could only hope to maintain her position through greater effort . . . for operative failure would doom her to disgrace in the eyes of these people. Carol instinctively realized the need, and Stratini encouraged her efforts to hold their favor. So those who met her gladly accepted Carol and spurred her to strive all the harder, through flattery half sincere, and praise partly selfish—based on Stratini's estimate of Carol's potential greatness.

Then, toward the end of the season, the maestro rested a bit, and declared a semi-holiday in reward for Carol's devotion. Estelle and Freddy Delancey were coming up for a fortnight, and the two were bringing Schuyler Tremaine in their motor. Aline had invited a fluttering flock of flappers, and in their wake would arrive a troupe of dancing men. A shipment of genuine Scotch had prompted an invitation to Gramercy Bleeker, and Mrs. R.-S. announced that she had prevailed upon Whitney Duane to spend a few days with them.

The news startled Carol out of her new-found calm, and Stratini had been quick to note her change of demeanor. Here indeed was something his eye had overlooked, and he chuckled as he berated his crass stupidity. Yet even now it would be as well to watch this little affair, when he opened wide for a time the gates of his songbird's cage. Whitney, he felt, would prove a harmless wooer, and if he should interfere with the impresario's plans, Stratini could readily send him packing. As an Incorporator, he was amenable to the manager's will.

Carol, however, kept her room on the afternoon when Whitney was due to arrive. She somehow sensed that his coming would mean the end of his silence, and she wished to marshal her forces to deal with him. If he should prove repentant and slightly sentimental, their meeting was bound to prove unpleasant for her. If, on the other hand, he chose to remain aloof, she would breathe a sigh of relief; but with a bitter smile, she anticipated still a third attitude. Suppose he should prove sarcastic or accusing? Inconceivable in one of Whitney's nature, this was not impossible. And she told herself that if such proved the case, she would meet him on his own ground.

The others had come the night before, and Freddy Delancey proposed an aerial variation of a bathing-suit celebration. His hydroplane had preceded him

as well as his fame as a fusser, and the flappers flitted about him, eager for a flirtation and a ride in the light of the moon, for Freddy was regarded as a harmless romantic devil. Stratini approved the plan and chose the principal part in the pageant Freddy was staging. The impresario was to be the Neptune of the Air, and Freddy, dressed as a Martian, proposed to act as his pilot.

The costume ordered for Carol startled her somewhat, yet she rather relished her rôle as a Siren. Singing aboard the plane in which Neptune would arrive, she was to summon mere "mortals" down to the surf. After that they would dance on the sands and disport themselves in the sea, while Delancey would soar above their heads and shower the bathers with flowers. Just because of the novel tinge to the program, everyone was as eager as a kid for the revel. Carol hailed it with delight, but, on hearing of Whitney's coming, a consciousness of misgiving began to possess her. Appearing as a Mermaid would really be her première in the realm of make-believe, and she had been speculating all day as to how her entrance would be received. She meant to sing as she had never sung before, not merely to show Stratini what she could do, but because her pent-up emotions craved the relief of such a lark. Standing before her glass, she had imagined herself in fact what she pretended to be . . . and she found it fun. And for an hour she practiced alluring gestures, worthy of a bewitching fabled Lorelei.

Now she recoiled from the rôle . . . but soon, with a flash of anger, she resolved to make her interpretation even more realistic than she had at first intended. She would triumph in spite of Whitney . . . in spite of them all. She would show them that she could act as well as sing, and what was more, she would demonstrate that she did not care in the least what Whitney or anyone else might think of her. As an *artiste*, they must hail her. She would make them gasp at

her daring when she revealed her talented beauty. Then, if this sanctimonious, pussyfooting reprobate pretended to be shocked in public, he might do so and be damned!

Yet Carol's determination oozed as she looked from her window, attracted by the sound of a roadster running up the driveway. Peering through the chintz hangings, she saw Judson directing two footmen to carry the luggage, and caught a glimpse of Aline in a sports suit, greeting them on the terrace. Gramercy Bleeker was draping himself against the side of the car, as he fished for a match for his briar, and clambering from beneath the wheel was Whitney.

For a moment, Carol thought his eyes met hers, and she drew back in alarm, a flush coming over her features as she loathed herself for her weakness. But the reaction of seeing him was stronger than she had imagined, and with a miserable sigh, she threw herself on the bed. Almost forgotten pains clutched at her heart, and visions, practically vanished, flashed across her brain. It was not the thought of her blow in the park that tortured her now, but the memory of other events . . . longer ago . . . the things which prompted her anger that day, rather than Whitney's kiss.

But a knock at the door made her stifle her tears in the pillow, and pretending to be aroused from a nap, Carol called out a sleepy answer. In trouped a group in negligee, followed by two silent maids bearing liquid refreshment, bonbons and cigarettes. In the lead was Estelle Delancey, wielding a long jade holder in lieu of a marshal's baton, her dark eyes sparkling mischievously as she nodded to Carol.

"Come out of it!" she commanded, as the servants withdrew. "We're here for a serious pow-wow. If you want tea, better order it . . . we're all having rickies."

In an instant the room resembled a fabulous nabob's

harem, and the favorites curled themselves in the window seats, or squatted on cushions against the walls, crosslegged. With a yawn, Estelle stretched herself languorously upon a *chaise-longue*, her filmy, lacy robe revealing each lithe line of her figure. Her wealth of Titian hair and the touch of red at the lobes of her ears made her appearance exotic, and she surveyed, with open approval, the alluring silken expanse of her long, slender legs. They were famous. Almost too thin to be lovely, yet somehow exquisitely beautiful in the delicacy of their molding, they were always plainly visible when Estelle was photographed. Having once been the flesh and bone of contention in a divorce proceeding, Estelle had exhibited them to the jury from her place in the witness chair, and in so doing won complete exoneration and undue masculine adulation. She liked her legs and took no pains to conceal the fact or its cause.

Carol contemplated them seriously . . . speculatively . . . comparatively. Then, sitting up, she shrugged—line for line, her own gave her no cause for envy. Estelle's features were too cynically hard to be lureful . . . and Estelle could not sing. Carol's voice, charm and beauty would make her the belle of the evening. And perhaps it was that knowledge which caused Estelle to call her present council in the enemy's camp. Plainly she regarded Carol as a rival.

"Behold the shock troops!" Estelle waved her cigarette at the girls, who were giggling into their gin. "The purpose of this little gathering is to plan to pep up the petting this evening. We're not going to be geese while our ganders have all the fun!"

"I take it then," smiled Carol, "that this is a protest meeting of neglected wives."

"Freely translated," Doris Tilton explained, "it means that 'Stelle's had a row with Freddy. She knows he'll get all soused and sentimental, and instead of calling him down, she's going to hold him up."

"Which, further interpreted," Ann Burton put in, "indicates that Estelle needs a new dinner ring or some such thoughtful trifle expressing Freddy's affection."

Estelle shrugged, and, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke from her delicate nostrils, crossed her ankles and clicked her high red heels. "Oh, Freddy's due for a lesson, all right," she admitted, "but it mustn't be too severe. If he'd cut out his foolish affairs and his peace offerings stopped, I'd have to do without ever so many things!"

"Naturally," catted Lenoire Willing, "loving tribute, regularly received, is more satisfactory than delinquent alimony."

Estelle gave her a scowl and then ostentatiously fingered a glittering string of emeralds recently acquired. "Penance for Freddy's flier in the movies," she said with a smile of amused satisfaction. "Had himself appointed to the board of censors and made a personal test of the decent length of a kiss."

"How'd you happen to know?" Doris Tilton asked, and Estelle laughed in answer.

"It seems they actually shot the picture . . . Freddy and Vera Verdayne . . . and Anthony Balloumore was out at the studio. I had luncheon with him at the Ritz, a day or two afterwards, and, like the good fellow he is, Tony brought me a still of the film. . . ."

"A still with a kick, I'll bet!" Ann Burton wagered.

"It produced these emeralds," Estelle confessed, "and Freddy now admits that the screen is immoral. But suppose we call the meeting to order. I don't want to discourage him too much, but I think it's time we registered protest adequately. The question is just what can we do to set our hubbies' little angoras prancing . . . without burning our fingers, of course?"

"I'm going after Schuyler Tremaine," Doris Tilton advised them. "He's just back from Hawaii, and he ought to be full of the romance that's linked with ukulele ladies. . . ."

"Help yourself!" assented Estelle, inconsequentially. "I'm out for bigger game. If I want to make Freddy really jealous, I'll have to go after Stratti . . . that is," she added, maliciously sweet in her tone, "if Carol doesn't mind."

Half jesting as she pointedly made the remark, Carol caught its serious undercurrent. The meaning flash in Estelle's eyes aroused her ire. Yet her resentment was purely one of revulsion for the other's tactics. She despised her for what she hinted. That the obvious charms of Estelle would appeal to Stratini had not dawned upon Carol, yet she assumed that beneath his skeptical, blasé veneer, Stratini was thoroughly human in a virile, masculine way. She said as much to Estelle, disclaiming all personal knowledge, and found herself embarrassed at the silence in the room.

Their evident attitude threw her into a fury, these women who were worse than the men with whom they openly flirted. Born to leisure and laughing at love, they mocked at the ties of marriage. And this insight into their instincts stirred Carol's disgust. They seemed like glorified grafters, playing at being vampires, with their husbands as their victims. They exacted reparation for kisses they did not resent, and threatened retribution in kind if their males should prove too faithless.

But Carol restrained her inward rage and calmly appraised Estelle. Rumors of separation were constant concerning her, yet she and her husband went carelessly on . . . disconsolate when they were parted . . . unhappy when they were together. Neither deceived the other, yet each dreaded a break, for marriage had its advantages and dissolution its dangers. Their wedded state gave them freedom and license to do as they liked, and Freddy seemed willing to pay to the full for Estelle's wifely protection. Technically, too, the arrangement safeguarded her flirting, although no one could picture Freddy in the rôle of Nemesis.

Disinterestedly aware of the situation, thanks to the tattle sheets, Carol was none the less perturbed by all that Estelle suggested. Her deliberate slap at Carol cut like the lash of a whip. What they thought of her was obvious, despite her incorporation, and the knowledge made her more bitter as she dwelt once more on what Whitney had said. No matter what she had done in the past, no matter what she did now, they could not conceive of her holding Stratini's interest solely through the magic of her wonderful voice. They even presumed to ask her permission to flirt in what were assumed to be her private preserves! Then anger gave way to amusement as Carol surmised how quickly Stratini would see through their wiles.

"Well since you don't mind, old dear," Estelle was saying, "little Diana will go a-hunting again. Stratini should prove quite a feather, yet fairly safe for one's cap, since affairs with him are condoned . . ."

But she paused with embarrassed abruptness. Unheard by Estelle, Aline had come into the room, and now she stood still on the threshold, staring at the speaker. Warning looks from the others silenced Estelle's remark, and, regaining her composure, she waved a friendly hand to the daughter of her hostess. "We're setting our caps for Stratti," she altered her tone, avoiding Carol's gaze, "and the purpose of this meeting is to plan a trap for him. Do give us a suggestion."

"I wouldn't even presume to offer advice to *you*," Aline pretended deference to superior wisdom, yet there was no mistaking the flash of her eyes. "But I might say *en passant*, that when I sit in a game, I pause, at least, to give a thought to its probable limit."

"Then you mean that the play with Stratti is inclined to be steep?" Estelle refused to give in.

"I mean what I mean, old dear," Aline said with a shrug, "and an old married woman like you ought to know what I'm getting at!"

"*Touche!*" cried Doris Tilton, hoping to head off the topic. "Out of the mouths of flappers and jazabelles comes infinite wisdom!"

But Aline chose to ignore Estelle and sauntered over to Carol, lighting a cigarette and ringing for a maid. "Here I am with my fiery tongue almost burned to a crisp, and I find these giddy guzzlers have mopped up all the gin. Now on the level, Carol, *ain't they perfectly awful!*"

Her remark broke the tension, and also broke up the meeting, but as the others slipped off to dress, Aline remained, perching herself on the side of the bed, and sipping a fresh-made rickey. "I sometimes wonder," she said at last, "why men want to get married. Wives are either too stupid or think they're entirely too clever; but if 'Stelle Delancey doesn't want a divorce, she'd better step a bit slowly."

"Do you think she meant what she said?" Carol put in softly, wondering whether Aline had heard the entire remark.

"She's mean enough to mean anything!" Aline said with contempt. "I don't blame Freddy for flirting, and I never *could* understand what 'Stelle saw in him. But one of these days, her lanky legs'll get her into trouble, if she doesn't stop giving close-ups to every man she sees."

In spite of her recent resentment, Carol could not help laughing, and an inborn sense of fairness made her defend Estelle.

"She can't be as bad as she tries to pretend . . . and I doubt whether she's as naughty as she thinks she is."

"Which is more or less the trouble with most of our senseless sex!" said Aline. "We either pose as Puritans when we're on parade, and sneak our sins in secret; or else cut up capers in front of the crowd and wear flannel nighties in private!"

"Is that what *you* do?" Carol could not help teasing.

"Oh, I'm as nasty a cat as the rest!" Aline blamed herself. "I'm a sneaky 'fraid-cat, too! Oh, Carol, I wish I were genuine . . . frankly on the level . . . that I could really *want* to be good . . . like you."

"Like *me*?" Carol said. "How do you *know* I'm good?"

"It's perfectly simple!" Aline replied, with a saucy toss of her head, completely forgetting her ardent desire of an instant before. "You *couldn't* be bad since you've had no chance to be anything else but good."

"For which virtue, I take it," Carol observed, "I can't deserve much credit. . . ."

"Well, at any rate," Aline appraised, "you're different from lots of ladies who accept what Omar said much too literally . . . you know what I mean . . . that line where he says it's better to 'take the cash and let the credit go.'"

"But suppose I *have* taken the cash . . . and now I want the credit?" Carol tested her. "Suppose I've eaten my cake . . . and believe I can keep my penny?"

"In that event," laughed Aline, declining a serious answer, "I'll make you a nice little bow, my dear, and ask for your recipe!"

II.

To Carol, the events of the early evening were more like a hazy dream than reality. Her impressions were fragmentary, fantastic . . . unreal. She knew herself to be an integral part of what went on, yet somehow, she felt herself away from it all . . . a spectator rather than a participant. Here and there little thumbnail pictures stood out with momentary clearness . . . colorful incidents . . . scintillating snatches of repartee . . . but the ephemeral threads of her vision refused to weave themselves into any sort of consecutive, tangible fabric.

Descending to join the others in the living hall, her emotions were those of an actress making her entrance in a new play . . . an actress not yet letter-perfect in her part . . . not even quite certain of the proper interpretation of her rôle. Yet she was cognizant of a new self-confidence . . . a consciousness of power which had come from consulting her mirror a moment before. Pausing on the landing, she realized that its reflection had not been fulsomely flattering.

Her appearance electrified the group of guests in the dim-lit living hall. She saw them glance up, noted their change of expressions . . . and knew that she dominated the scene. The thrill of triumph was new, yet not unwelcome . . . a forerunner of greater domination almost within her reach . . . and with it, her ambition took firmer hold. She was surer of herself . . . less concerned with the others and their opinion of her. And before the evening was over, she meant to establish herself.

The besiegers of Judson's cocktail-wagon ceased their senseless chatter, and Gramercy Bleeker paused

in the midst of his witty nonsense. Schuyler Tremaine's eyes ceased to caress Doris Tilton and looked at the girl on the stair with open admiration. Aline, with a poker from the fireplace, paused in an imitation of Freddy Delancey's putting, and Estelle forgot her efforts to fascinate Stratini.

The impresario arose hastily, said something by way of curt apology to his companion, and crossed the room to meet Carol. Half hesitating as he approached, she made a striking picture against the somber tapestried background of the stair. The severe lines of her black velvet gown accentuated the curves of her youthful figure, and her poise was perfect despite a tell-tale embarrassment. A collar of jade clasped her throat and set off its delicate contours, and Stratini's eyes sparkled as they relished the delicate tints of her olive-ivory flesh.

With foreign courtliness, he bent to brush her fingertips with his lips, and the compliment he murmured brought fresh color to her cheeks. Vaguely, Carol caught the resentful sneer on Estelle Delancey's features, and observed the knowing nod she exchanged with Doris Tilton. Stratini's desertion of Estelle and his open devotion to Carol were pregnant with meaning to those who had gathered to gossip in Carol's boudoir that afternoon.

Carol sensed their affectation of scorn and superior wisdom, and the spirit of conflict blazed in her breast. Her body grew rigid, and she threw back her head in defiance, well aware that her challenge was understood. Then something within her snapped under the women's stares and the sophisticated scrutiny of half a dozen men. Knowing what they thought of Stratini's kiss, his salute seemed to sear her hand. Again she felt herself judged for what she was not. This time the experience was different, yet it hurt her none the less, and she was torn between a desire to cry out and an impulse to retreat. Eager to rush back to her room,

she turned in bewilderment; but Mrs. R.-S.'s presence blocked her path of flight. Charming in her assured composure, Carol's sponsor gave her a sustaining smile, and gradually Carol's panic gave way to a sense of security.

But her heart was pounding wildly, and she tried to choke back her tears . . . tears which blurred a vision of Whitney Duane, sitting, silent and thoughtful, at the foot of the stairs. Aline, standing on tiptoe, reached over the balustrade, holding out a cocktail, and Carol heard Gramercy Bleeker proposing a toast to her.

Happiness surged through her veins like potent wine, haunting fears vanished, and the present laughed at the past. No matter what the others thought, Mrs. R.-S. understood. Stratini, too, was proud of her, and she dared not disappoint him. This was to be *her* evening . . . the night for which she had longed . . . and only the future counted . . . despite the price she must pay in the eyes of public opinion. After all, these others were only her audience, curious and envious . . . utterly unimportant personally. When her triumph came she could afford to ignore them, and before this evening was over she would have them at her feet. If she failed, the folly would be her fault . . . but she did not mean to fail.

Then, with the nonchalance of a finished *artiste*, she smiled and bowed her thanks, accepting their homage as though it were her due, yet with a proper note of modest appreciation which only tended to make them more enthusiastic. But gradually the stimulation of her elation began to wane. Carol thought the dinner would never end, and through it all she was dimly conscious of Whitney's presence at her side. She hardly recalled greeting him, nor could she have repeated a single word he said. Not once had his manner suggested the rift between them, and Carol was grateful for his considerate reserve. When he spoke,

she answered, yet her voice sounded far off, as though someone else replied in her stead. What she told him she did not know, nor could she fathom his thoughts, yet she was glad there had been no time for a *tête-à-tête*.

Alone in her room once more, she wondered if she was awake. A maid was busy adjusting the shoulder straps of her Sea-Siren costume, and she was eager for the approaching fête. The shimmer, sheer creation transformed her completely. A bodice of chiffon and silver gave the effect of foam, and coral ornaments were entwined in her blue-black hair, falling in careless confusion over her glistening shoulders. The tight-fitting skirt with its tail-like train was of tropical green, covered with scale-like spangles which caught the glint of the light as she posed before the mirror. With each sinuous movement, she pictured herself as a Mermaid in quest of men, and now, with a gay little laugh, she began to hum her lines with a subtle satisfaction. Soon she would be in the character and then her acting would tell!

Eager as a child, she slipped down the servants' stairs so as not to be seen. A maid threw a cloak about her and she tripped out to enter the waiting car. It was like a gay adventure, and she laughed as she saw Stratini seated against the cushions. With his artificial beard and his tinsel kingly crown, he looked very regal indeed as King of the Air and Sea.

Carol trembled a little. It was almost as though her début had come and she was about to step before the footlights of the opera at last. Stratini, recalling the great Pol Plançon in his make-up, lent to the illusion of the stage, and his evident satisfaction stirred Carol deeply. Sitting in front with the chauffeur, wearing goggles and helmet, and looking like some gnome, Freddy Delancey was chatting about his plane, and explaining how he meant to land on the moonlit beach. A little timorously, Carol wondered whether

the man was sober enough to steer his craft while they should be in the air, and she did not relish the amorous glances he gave her. Still, the presence of Stratini gave her confidence, and she knew that a fall from the plane would hardly mean more than a drenching.

As the car sped toward the hangars, other guests were gathering at Clifcleft, the lights and the purr of their motors filling the evening air. Within another hour the party would be in full swing and Carol found her pulses racing madly. Elated, she let Stratini lift her from the machine and place her securely in the car of the hydro. Ponderously, he climbed in himself, clutching his Neptune's trident and swearing over the hindrance of his wired silken wings, worn to personify majesty over the currents of air.

On the silvered sands, great piles of driftwood burned, and as the plane soared blithely, Carol could see little groups of "mortals" wending their way to the beach. Faintly, above the whirr of the motor, the strains of a hidden orchestra drifted up to them, and against the rocks stood out the refreshment tents . . . silhouetted like some ghostly illicit encampment.

Gayly upward, Delancey guided his craft, and Carol found herself thrilled by the novel sensation. Now the world seemed upside down, and the moon was crazily placed. She longed to leap out and tread the path it traced over the waves, swelling and sighing softly . . . now beneath, now *above* her. Then at Stratini's signal, Carol began to sing, and her glorious voice rang out on the still night. Down, down, down, came the plane, with a rush and a roar that mingled with mellifluous notes . . . a shock and a curtain of spray . . . a laugh and the pounding of surf . . . as the flying boat took the water . . . dashed crazily through the breakers and shot to the smooth, moist strand.

Stratini was standing up, clutching a wire support, and now the notes of the orchestra mingled with Carol's tones. Weirdly, the music sounded . . . softly mourn-

ful was her voice . . . and the Siren's song seemed to lure all who heard to follow her to her lair. Then, in the glare of a searchlight, Carol stood revealed in the daring loveliness of her Lorelei costume. By her side, Stratini resembled some giant guard, warning men of the danger of listening to her lay; yet despite his ferocious appearance, there was not a man on the beach who would not have gladly gone down to the deepest submarine grotto at Carol's tempting summons.

She was conscious of their ardent admiration, and the applause which rang out was music in her ears. Then countless Naiads scampered down the beach and darted into the ocean, laughing and shouting wildly in welcome to Neptune's daughter. Drenched by the spray, Carol shuddered as the balmy breeze blew her hair from her shoulders, and the light of the moon made her spangles glitter. She smiled as shouting men waved their hands to her and dashed off after the Sirens, determined to snare these beauties before they were lost in the sea.

Lifting her in his arms, Stratini set Carol down, a dripping, delicious figure, delighted at the success of her bizarre reception. In the glare of the searchlight she almost felt nude, and a flush overspread her cheeks as she realized the revelation of charm her scanty attire permitted. Then, as the soft breeze wafted a chance remark to her burning ears, she wanted to cast herself in the sea or bury herself in the sand.

"Wouldn't our friend, the Rector, have the time of his life!" Gramercy Bleeker called out gayly to a companion. "He could build a sermon on this, and I know a damned good text . . ."

"You!" came a scoffing chorus. "Where on earth did you find it?"

"In the Bible, kind sirs," he answered. "Happen to have one about you? No? How come? Then lend me your ears and I'll tell you—Matthew: ten, twenty-six, dearly beloved brethren! . . . 'There is nothing

covered that shall not be revealed'—Fair enough for the dominie, what?"

"For Heaven's sakes, don't suggest it!" Aline's voice protested. "I understand he's back in New York, and he might make use of it!"

Carol stood trembling like a child, afraid to run or stand still. Her costume was nothing . . . more nor less . . . than she would have worn on the stage . . . yet here on the beach, propinquity made it seem almost indecent. Then Aline stepped into the limelight, and Carol's embarrassment ebbed. Aline might have been a blonde, little, bobbed-headed Cupid—if only she had possessed a bow and quiver. The frill which stood out from her waist made one think of a Kewpie, and only the two blue wings were lacking to make her the replica of a tiny china doll.

"Oh, Carol!" she called as she gayly danced across the sand, "you were simply wonderful . . . and we're all so proud of you! But you ought to have had something on, up in the air in that plane! Gram, run up to the tents and fetch her a wrap right away."

Then Whitney Duane edged through the circle and proffered a silver flask. Stratini nodded to Carol, and she drained the little cup, shuddering as the brandy burned her throat; but its warmth was welcome in her veins, and the strong, smooth liquor filled her with the joy of living. Her costume was quickly forgotten, her embarrassment cast off, and as the hidden musicians struck up a dreamy air, she felt a desire to dance. Others were toddling on the beach, curious, exotic figures, in daring, dripping costumes; and as Gramercy whirled Aline away, Whitney Duane caught Carol eagerly in his arms.

He had not assumed a character, and dressed in a loungy sports suit, presented a curious contrast, clasping this deep-sea creature in an enfolding embrace. Moving in rhythm to the haunting music, they seemed to be oblivious of all that went on about them, and

their bodies swayed as they glided in perfect harmony with the alluring air. Now Whitney heard her sigh softly, as Carol nestled close, and the perfume of her hair grew fragrant in his nostrils. Carol found exquisite content in the strength of his clasp, and she only thought of happiness and the glory of the night. She wanted to feel forever the bliss of the gentle caress in which Whitney hungrily held her, and she gloried in the ardor with which he crushed her to him.

Dancing on as in a dream, they drifted away from the others, far up the beach where the shadow of giant cliffs wrapped them discreetly in shadows. Neither dared to speak, lest the spell should be broken, yet tender words were trembling on their quivering lips. Carol was like some eerie sprite, gracefully gliding over the silvered sands, and Whitney whirled her faster, in cadence with the pounding of his eager heart, pressed close against hers, and seeming almost a part of her. Then, in the ecstasy of the moment, he drew her up in his arms, holding her off the ground and kissing her rapturously. Confidently at last, he took the lips he longed for, knowing that she must care since she clung to him like that . . . abandonedly . . . willingly.

With the warmth of his mouth against hers, Carol began to understand the cause of her misery . . . the emptiness of the weeks when he had kept away. Having lashed him did not matter now . . . she would have struck him again . . . she almost felt as though she *wanted* to hurt him. Yet, ghost-like, there arose the specter which made her tremble despite her contentment: the specter before which he would recoil once she should point it out. She knew that Whitney knew she was not Stratini's mistress . . . no matter what Estelle and the other girls might hint. Yet she felt she *must* tell him the thing she dreaded most. Whether or not he believed her, she could not keep it back . . . and the story tried to force itself through the lips he kissed. Yet it was no use. . . .

Then, as she struggled inwardly, he let her go with a sigh. His hand caught her fingers and led her up the incline, over sharp jagged rocks which cut her silk-shod feet, and made him think that the cry of her conscience was only a physical hurt. She stumbled, and with a tender whisper, he caught her in his arms as he might have lifted a child. She buried her head in his shoulder, and felt him climbing on, lifting her to the summit where they could be alone. Now he was putting her down, sheltered from sight from below by a great, jutting crag; and quietly he curled himself at her feet. Opening her eyes, she moodily stared at the sea, watching the dancing moonbeams tinting the rippling waves, and a sudden sense of regret made her draw back from him.

"I'm sorry," she murmured at last, averting her face from his, "I never should have let you . . . kiss me . . . like that. . . ."

"You mustn't misunderstand," he caught her to him roughly, "I want you to know what I meant that day in the park——"

"It isn't that!" she said quickly, a little catch in her voice. "I've hated myself for that blow—more than a thousand times—not because I *struck* you—but because I had no right to resent what you did! And I wouldn't have now," she added, "if I didn't know that you *mean* it!"

She could not keep back the tears, but he did not grasp her meaning . . . perhaps it would not have mattered then, even if he had. Yet Carol was utterly miserable . . . unable to say any more. She had just implied what she dared not say, and she wished for the courage to leap from the rock into the depths of the sea. Happiness might not be there, but at least she ought to find peace.

But before Whitney could answer her, she was startled by voices nearby. Stratini's laugh rang out behind the rock at her elbow, and now she heard a faint

protest in the teasing tones of Estelle. "Don't be silly!" Estelle was saying, impudently, "you know no price is too great for something you really want! Since you really rule the stars, pick me just one from the heavens . . . then, if you like, I'll honestly give you a worth while kiss!"

Apparently her condition amused Stratini, but as he stepped in the line of Carol's vision, he solemnly shook his head. "My stars are only a trust," he answered Estelle, "a sacred treasure to guard for the patrons of the opera. Sometimes thieves break in and try to steal them from me . . . sometimes jealous ones attempt to dim their luster. Then I become a great ogre and strike relentlessly! My stars are the jewels of my crown, the symbols of my power. I do not bargain for them. Ask for the moon, my child, and I'll gladly get it for you. Demand my head . . . and I give it cheerfully. . . ."

"But suppose I want your *heart*?" Estelle insinuated.

"Then you ask what I cannot give," he told her very slowly, a sardonic light in his deep-set eyes.

Scorning her eavesdropping, Carol hung upon his words. She wondered what he meant to say, and deep down in her heart, she trembled that Whitney might hear. He, too, was growing uncomfortable, but to announce their presence would only make matters worse. It was better to sit in silence and wait till the others passed on; and Whitney resented, unreasoningly, this unexpected intrusion. Like Carol, he was aware of the boon Estelle was asking, and her veiled reference aroused his ire. Yet Whitney knew Stratini, and inwardly he was content to let Stratini answer.

Slowly they saw Estelle draw herself to her full height . . . her movement full of lure in its sinuous languor, as the silvery haze bathed her coppery hair. Her eyes were like tempting pools of fire, waiting to be awakened, and the jewels of her gorgeous girdle sparkled as she stepped a little away from him with

undulating grace. She might have been an Egyptian queen, gloating over a captive as she led him on to destruction.

"Why?" she breathed. Her carmined lips were close to his, and she held her hands outstretched, fingers raised and palms turned out, like Isis repelling a lover not yet completely enthralled.

But Stratini did not answer. Instead they heard him laugh; then he caught the girl in his powerful arms. It seemed as though her frame must snap in the strain of his brutal embrace, but he only swung her from her feet and held her at arm's length, like some giant, prehistoric male, appraising a coveted morsel.

"Why speak of hearts?" he asked her cynically. "What has the heart to do with the taste of luscious lips? *Your* heart is not your own to give . . . yet you would like to have mine . . . not because you treasure it . . . but because it would amuse you. . . . Don't struggle . . . you meant me to take this kiss . . . and this . . . and this . . . and this one! You wanted me to *want* it . . . but you thought you could withhold it! At most you were going to give me only a hint of passion . . . a promise that would set my restless blood on fire."

He was kneeling, pinning her against the sands, struggling and kicking and trying to tear at his face with her long, pointed nails . . . but in his clutch she was as powerless as a child. Her eyes grew wild with terror, her face distorted with fear, and the scream she dared not utter died in her parched throat. Carol was trembling with apprehension, and she half sprang to her feet, but Whitney put a restraining hand on her arm.

"You *wanted* me to bring you here!" Stratini's deep tones thundered, and Estelle's lids dropped beneath his angered gaze. "You meant to play with love . . . pretending to offer what women have sold since the world began . . . but, unlike an honest courtesan, you want to balk at your bargain . . . you tease a man to

take a kiss and then demand that he go! Bah! Your soul is too shriveled to understand what every prostitute knows! Content yourself with the petting of callow youths . . . and treasure the thing you like to call your reputation. It's so utterly, foolishly worthless—you couldn't *give* it to me!"

With a gesture of disgust, he arose and stared at the sea, ignoring the woman who cowered, clutching at the sand. She was sobbing as she dragged herself, disheveled, to her knees, and her eyes blazed as she quivered and tried to find words of reproach.

Just once, Stratini shrugged as he stared down at her, a contempt akin to loathing written upon his features. "Please . . . peace, peace!" he waved her from him. "You're going to call me a brute, or some such banality. Instead, go back to your husband. Weep and wail when you tell him what Stratini has done! No doubt he will be amused. Flabby fool that he is, even the man you married knows that your sins are shams. That's why the poor devil is miserable—because he can't divorce you!"

Then, without even looking back, he strode down the incline, humming a little air to himself, as Estelle watched his departure in speechless rage. In silence Carol watched the chastened woman, gasping and clawing wildly in her torment; and Carol knew it would not do to approach her now. Yet she felt the cruelty of Stratini's callousness, and her sympathy swelled as she longed to go to Estelle. Then, conscious of Whitney's gaze, she hung her own head, wondering what the man would think of *her*. . . .

But his arm slipped gently about her, and cautiously, he drew her back into protesting shadow. "Don't think too harshly of Stratti," he whispered into her ear. "He only tried to teach her a needed lesson. I hope she'll profit by it. Women like that are revolting . . . neither one thing nor the other!"

"But it's horrible!" Carol exclaimed, subduing her

tone. "He shouldn't have talked to her . . . like *that!*"

"Why not?" Whitney defended. "It's time she realized it . . . a man may give his heart to a woman who gives him her all . . . but he's bound to despise a girl who cheats when it comes to cheating!"

"You mean that you would care more for a girl . . . ?" the words froze on her tongue, and, trembling uncontrollably, she drew away from him.

"I mean," said Whitney slowly, "that Estelle's a lucky woman. Another man might have *taken* what she meant to keep . . . and, in taking it, have reviled her! Stratti told her the truth . . . as few men could have done it. I sometimes wonder, dear, if you really know Stratini."

III.

THE driftwood fires on the beach burned low, and the orchestra was hushed, but shouts and laughter floated back to the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant cottage. Here and there shadowy figures stood out in the waning moonlight, still dancing and playing pranks in the gray of approaching dawn, and a score of motors were parked where chauffeurs slumbered, waiting for guests who lingered.

But Carol was far too weary to rejoin the groups on the sand, and Whitney, sensing her mood, walked by her side in silence. She freed her arm from his . . . not in anger, but gently . . . and he did not again attempt to touch her. The scene she had witnessed unwillingly seemed to have deadened her sense of awakened joy, and now he had not even the courage to take her hand. He knew that the slightest physical contact would have filled her with horror, and Whitney was disgruntled because of what she had seen.

Yet, in a way, he was glad. He did not in the least like the Delanceys' presence at Clifcleft, for he loathed their sort and the things they stood for. In fact, he rather wondered why Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant asked them to be her guests. Everyone was discussing them, with an amused contempt, and he speculated as to how much longer they would find themselves welcome. Of course he knew that Estelle and Aline had been chums at finishing school. He knew, too, that Mrs. R.-S. never frowned upon folly until it grew to be more than heedless foolishness. Yet it seemed to him that in the Delanceys' case, too much tolerance might be worse than too little. But he promptly dismissed the thought, vaguely attributing it to a latent loyalty to his uncle's narrow views.

Which reminded him . . . now that Doctor Duane had returned, it was time to speak of Carol . . . yet first, of course, he would have to speak to her. He had meant to this evening. Now it would not do; in fact, if he mentioned the matter further, his words would hurt rather than help his cause. He would have to make her understand the Rector's attitude, for he was morally certain the Rector would think her immoral. A girl of unknown antecedents, destined to sing on the stage, would be bound to prove offensive to him as the wife of a Duane; and unless the Rector should marry, Whitney was likely to be the last of his line. Rather than see the name perpetuated at the cost of an unknown alliance, the minister would no doubt prefer that Whitney be childless; yet this was all sheer nonsense, Whitney told himself.

The Rector had married Estelle and Freddy Delancey; if he stood for them he had no ground on which to object to Carol! And Whitney did not mean to yield if Carol was willing. Yet he knew what a battle impended. She might not care to face it.

They were on the deserted walk through the dew-bathed formal garden, and just ahead the cottage loomed like some ghostly castle. Shaded lights lit the veranda, and from the upper windows a glow here and there announced a retiring guest. Carol would have paused to rest by the pergola, but voices warned the two that someone was there. Whitney was not sure, but he thought he caught a glimpse of Freddy Delancey, and he was certain the other costume belonged to Doris Tilton. Idiots! Whitney would have liked to give them a bit of his mind; then he wondered if he would be constant when he should be married. He rather thought he would . . . hoped so, anyway . . . but then, perhaps, it depended a great deal upon one's marriage. These two made rather a farce . . . and then he recalled Estelle and Stratini. When he thought of that woman, he only loved Carol the more.

Now, at the foot of the steps leading to the terrace, Carol turned and gave him her hand. The tips of her fingers were cold, and he saw her body tremble, not with the chill of approaching day, but because she was nervous. He could not blame her and he longed to take her in his arms . . . to comfort her as he might a weary child . . . but most of all he wanted to hold her close and tell her that he loved her . . . that all the world might be rotten—but not his regard for her. He thought she would understand . . . be happier if she knew.

But what she said surprised him . . . routed his resolution to tell her after all.

“Whitney,” his name came very slowly, “I’ve been wondering something . . . something rather terrible. . . .”

He felt relieved . . . she was only distraught . . . it could not be serious.

“Yes?” he said indulgently, not even trying to draw her closer.

“It’s about Aline,” she went on, without withdrawing her hand, “you don’t suppose . . . Aline’s like *that* . . . do you?”

“Naturally not!” he assured her. “Aline’s a true little sport . . . she’s the sort who could go through the jungle—alone with a man and a nigger guide—and no one would even think such a trip peculiar.”

“I’m glad,” was all she said, and slowly she turned away, mounting the steps as he watched her worshipingly.

“Carol!” he called, “Carol!” But she only quickened her pace. He wanted to dash after her, but something held him back. Then the roar of a roadster dinned in his ears. Judson came out on the upper veranda, alert in spite of his guiding fuddled guests to their respective chambers, and Whitney saw Carol pause by the *porte-cochère*. The long low car with its

cold, white lights, rushed between them, and Whitney glimpsed Gramercy Bleeker handling the wheel.

"Something wrong?" he called, and leaped forward as a woman's screams shrilled on the morning air.

"Last contingent of casualties!" Bleeker chuckled and swung himself from the seat. "'Stelle Delancey's got shell shock . . . listened too long to the naughty things the wild waves have been whispering."

Schuyler Tremaine stepped from the side seat, and the two tried to left the limp woman between them. With a polo coat enveloping her tattered Egyptian costume, Estelle made a pitiful figure as she darted from their grasp. Lashing them with her spiteful tongue and flailing with her arms, she staggered toward the steps, laughing hysterically . . . unconscious of what she said . . . unaware of what she was doing. Her strength was almost uncanny.

The two men turned to Whitney, perplexed to know what to do, and instinctively his gaze met Carol's. He read the pity in her face, knew the cold fear that had seized her . . . then he saw her hasten down the steps.

"Estelle . . . please!" she begged, catching the girl by the arm, entreating her to be still. Figures in dressing gowns peered down from the windows, and Whitney heard Freddy Delancey coming along the walk. Doris Tilton was not with him, having decided it wiser to stay where she was for the present. At best it would be a nasty scene, and when Estelle had been drinking like this her fancies were sure to run riot. Now she was staring at Carol in a dazed sort of resentment. "Well?" she demanded, and her features took on an expression of unreasoning fury. "What do *you* want, you . . ."

But her husband caught her rudely and shook her into silence. "Shut up, you fool!" he snarled. "Do you want the whole house to know you're crazy soused!"

Estelle shrugged drunkenly. "Take her away!" she sneered and would have fallen if Whitney had not

caught her as she lurched. Then she straightened up and her slender fingers clenched as her eyes blazed at Carol with insane hatred. "Oh, I know you!" she screamed at the top of her lungs in a frenzy, "I heard that woman bawl you out on the steps of the Plaza!"

Carol drew back as from a slap in the face, and Whitney heard Bleeker swear as he stepped between the two women. "Grab her and put her to bed!" he advised Delancey. "She doesn't know what she's saying . . . she's making a fool of herself!"

"I know it!" moaned Freddy helplessly, "but what am I going to do? Take hold and help me get her into the house."

"Oh, don't . . . you mustn't!" Carol cried out in agony. "Whitney! They're *hurting* her!" And pushing the men aside, she knelt by Estelle, as the crazed girl fell exhausted upon the lawn.

That ended her tirade, and as he lit a cigarette, Bleeker sighed with relief. He did not know Estelle had been near on that afternoon when Carol had fainted and he had come to the rescue, but Estelle's tongue was cruel enough when she was perfectly sober, and he did not desire her to tell all she knew when she was out of her mind.

"Don't bother," he whispered to Carol, "she won't remember a thing she said when she wakes up in the morning. . . ."

"Oh, it isn't that!" Carol said, with a grateful look, "it's the fact that she *knows* . . . and . . . perhaps . . . she knows the truth. . . ."

"Then tell it and beat her to it!" Bleeker advised, as Freddy and Whitney lifted the senseless form. "Nobody'd take any stock in anything she said . . . and besides, you mustn't forget that *I* was there that day. Whatever she says, I'll deny it—if you want me to."

"I wonder . . . whether I do!" Carol said piteously, and stared up the steps after Whitney almost hopelessly. She could hardly comprehend a nature like

Estelle's, and she knew that her own lips were sealed as to what she had seen on the beach. If she even so much as hinted of what she knew to Estelle, Mrs. Delancey would hardly dare to attack her again, yet Carol was fully aware that she would not wield such a weapon. Whitney, no doubt, would discount whatever Estelle might say, and Stratini would take her statements with a grain of salt; yet Stratini himself had unwittingly made Estelle her bitterest enemy . . . or had it been, she wondered—*quite* unwittingly. She was not sure that he had not done it deliberately—for the pitting of Estelle against her would appeal to his sense of humor.

And now from around the corner, the impresario came, smiling behind the frown that he turned upon Carol. How long Stratini had been there she could not know.

"What in ten thousand devils are you doing out here?" he fairly roared with astonished rage. "Are chills and colds of no consequence that you stay out of doors all night?"

"I'm sorry," said Carol, hanging her head, "I was just about to go in . . ."

"Bah!" Stratini exploded. "You are about to go in as the sun is about to come up! I leave you alone for a moment and you remain out for hours. To bed—at once—do you hear!"

Like a child discovered in mischief, Carol turned toward the house, yet her heart was heavy at having to leave them like this. Half way up the steps she paused, fearing that she would meet Whitney on her way to her room. She felt that she could not face him now . . . since she knew that he must have heard . . . and that he must be trying to figure the cause of Estelle's maudlin taunt.

"It's partly my fault," Bleeker sought to explain to Stratini. "Mrs. Delancey was ill and I asked Carol to . . ."

"Mrs. Delancey was *drunk!*" Stratini corrected, "and I do not desire my songbird to trouble herself with such matters. . . ."

"But I couldn't leave her like that!" Carol turned to say. "It would have been inhuman!"

"*Will* you go to bed!" he shouted at her. "If you wait another instant, I'll put you there myself—and don't suppose for one moment I'd hesitate to do it."

Bleeker grinned and Carol flushed as she fled to the house in confusion, fully aware that Stratini meant what he said literally. The living hall was deserted as she crossed to the stairs and paused a moment to listen before attempting ascent. It was silent above and she surmised that Estelle was at last in her room . . . then, as she gazed toward the landing, she heard someone descending.

"Is it you, dear?" asked Whitney's voice, and Carol wished she might hide, but Stratini and Bleeker cut off retreat.

"Yes," she answered softly, "but I'm terribly tired, if you please. . . . Don't ask me to tell you anything now. . . ." And she drew away from him as he held out his arms to her.

"Why, there's nothing to tell, is there, dear?" he asked of her gently. "I thought it was all understood . . . that we both knew we loved each other!"

"I'm sorry," she said with a choke in her voice, "but you mustn't think that . . . really! Some day, if you wish me to, I'll do my best to explain. . . ."

"You darling!" he cried and caught her passionately, kissing the words from her lips, and stroking her hair. "You can't ever explain away what's happened between us to-night! I *want* you, sweet, and you know it . . . you know you want me too. . . ."

"*Damnation!*" a thundering tone silenced his declaration, and Stratini banged his fist against the balustrade. "Must I take you by the hair and *drag* you to your bed!"

"Really, Stratti!" said Whitney, angry beyond all patience, and not a little embarrassed, but Carol slipped from his arms and fled away up the stairs.

"Now really *what?*" asked Stratini, not as greatly displeased as he tried to pretend. "Must I treat you all like a class of impossible children? But then you are in love . . . and that explains a multitude of sins! You have my sympathy."

"You make me tired!" snapped Whitney peevishly.

"Then go to bed!" Stratini waved him away. "Good night! How the devil can people think of themselves when God's staging His sunrise!"

And turning on his heel, he walked to the veranda, inhaling the morning freshness as he gazed up at the sky.

IV.

Two mornings later Gramercy Bleeker, in golf togs and looking the worse for wear, strolled into the breakfast room at noon. He had not seen Estelle since bringing her back to the cottage, and had calmly accepted the story that she was indisposed. She was not, he knew, and her voluntary seclusion was not prompted by any sudden sense of shame. More likely she was violently angry with Freddy, out there putting a ball about the clock course on the lawn. . . . Didn't interest Bleeker anyway, the Delanceys and their muddles.

"Silly stuff . . . the whole business!" he muttered, lighting a cigarette with a hand which trembled nervously, as he pondered the aftermath of the party on the beach. "Fool idea of Stratti's, keeping Carol shut up. It was Whitney's fault if anyone's—that she had stayed up all night. . . . What of it? . . . Didn't they all do it . . . and think nothing of it?" He only hoped Carol was not concerned over the things Estelle had said in her ravings.

Yet he could not help wondering just what was behind the attack of the boarding-house woman that afternoon on the steps of the Plaza. Not that it concerned him . . . Carol wasn't the only girl who'd ever been in debt . . . and she'd insisted on his taking the sum he'd given the shrewish woman. But if he could possibly help it he did not mean to let Estelle's nasty tongue annoy Carol about that affair. He did wish, though, that Carol would be a little more frank . . . that she'd speak to Mrs. R.-S. or Aline if she wouldn't confide in him. Whitney had not even mentioned Estelle's brief tirade, yet the glumness about the house was beginning to bore Bleeker. If it wasn't

for something he had in mind, he'd leave if he decently could.

Why couldn't folks mind their own affairs? Heaven knew they'd *enough* to mind, without butting into the business of others.

Listlessly he picked up the morning paper, skimmed it with scant interest; then swore to himself. Judson, aware of his symptoms, was mixing a bracer silently at the sideboard.

"Pardon me, sir," he said as he offered a silver tray. "But might I ask just what 'incorporated' means?"

"A corporation?" Bleeker repeated, absently looking over the edge of his paper, "a corporation's an association of individuals formed for the purpose of legally evading laws."

"Really, sir?" gasped the butler. "Can a man do that?"

"If he has the right lawyer he can," Bleeker assured him gravely. "Thinking of becoming a corporation, Judson?"

"I was wondering about Miss Carol, sir," Judson explained, a curious light in the eyes that avoided Bleeker's. "Surely *she* isn't trying to evade any law?"

A little annoyed, yet amused, Bleeker answered him as he downed the concoction he needed to soothe his nerves. "Certainly not," he said. "Miss Drayton is seeking protection from the laws of convention. If you're thinking of 'Carol Incorporated'—its purpose is to make Miss Drayton immune from the grumblings of Mrs. Grundy."

"Mrs. Grundy?" Judson scratched his head. "I don't think the lady has ever been entertained here. . . ."

"Probably not!" chuckled Bleeker, "but she's an intimate friend of the Rector's." Then, with ebbing patience, he asked, "Why do *you* wish to know?"

"Only idle curiosity, sir," Judson apologized.

"Well, don't be so damned curious!" Bleeker snapped

irritably, "and don't be idle either! I'm stepping out on the veranda . . . bring me a cocktail, will you?"

Then as he lowered his lanky form into a porch-swing, he frowned and read more closely a front page item which caught his attention. "Speaking of angels!" he murmured, "Dear old Doctor Duane's cutting loose again!"

And as he read down the column, the clink of spurs announced the appearance of Whitney Duane. "Why here's our little erring nephew!" Bleeker glanced up from the paper, a grin in his blood-shot eyes.

"Why don't you go to bed sober some night?" asked Whitney. "Afraid the shock would be fatal?"

"Doesn't intrigue me," Bleeker shook his head as the butler disappeared. "I've tried it . . . try anything once."

"You're drinking too much . . . on the level!" Whitney opined.

"Don't rag me in the morning!" Bleeker protested as he steadied the unpleasant motion of the swing. "You're a chip off the old block! Hang it, this damned swaying makes me dizzy!"

"Swings are treacherous things," smiled Whitney; "dangerous for débutantes in the moonlight and hard on hangovers in daylight."

"Say, lay off me, will you!" Bleeker drawled in disgust. "Isn't one preacher in a family enough? Here . . . regale yourself with the horrified utterances of your sanctified uncle, and learn what a vicious life you're leading. According to the Rector, ancient Babylon was an Epworth League compared to our modern society. The reverend gentleman has stripped us of every single shred of decency! He's torn our cloaks of respectability from our backs and left us as shockingly nude in our iniquity as a flock of abandoned Apollos and Aphrodites!"

Impatiently, Whitney snatched the paper from him and sought the item which prompted this outburst.

"Poor old boy!" sighed Whitney, "of course he couldn't wait to land to begin to pan us again . . . but you mustn't be too hard on him . . . he earnestly thinks he's right." Then, with a gathering frown, he began to digest the interview in detail. Obviously it annoyed him beyond measure, yet his manner was still apologetic for and defensive of his kinsman.

"I can't believe that he's referring to *this* house," Whitney refused to admit. "He's too fond of Mrs. R.-S. to criticize her parties. . . ."

"Think so?" chuckled Bleeker. "You haven't caught the half of it yet, my son. I assume that some fool reporter's showed him an early copy of this week's *Social Chat* . . . and the Rector has made the most of its nasty insinuations. Why, that story about Carol and Stratti is so thinly veiled that it hardly even pretends to conceal a single identity!"

"What's that?" asked Whitney, putting down the newspaper. "I haven't even seen it."

"Moncure Vanderpool had a copy at the Casino last night," Bleeker told him. "I think there's one in that pile of mail—with the magazines."

Whitney turned quickly to the wicker table with its stack of unopened periodicals and sought the wrapping of the familiar scandal-monging sheet.

"Waste of time to read it," Bleeker shrugged, "yet it makes me wild-eyed . . . such nonsense! The usual blackmailing, senseless drivel . . . quite the sort of stuff we're used to reading about ourselves. Nothing to get excited about . . . yet when I read the disgusting things I wonder why I don't commit murder or mayhem on some little editor's person. . . ."

"Maybe it wouldn't be nice to strike a lady," Whitney said meaningly. "Whoever lets out such gossip must be on the inside . . . and of course every whisper's bound to be misinterpreted."

"Hum!" grunted Bleeker. "Hadn't thought of that. Let me see it again."

With a gesture of revulsion, Whitney gave him the weekly, and slowly Bleeker re-read it through.

At a rather risqué beach-dance this week, the costume and conduct of a young woman of imagined vocal attainments caused considerable comment among the more prudish—if, indeed, the mental attitude of any of the well-known guests may be said to even faintly border upon a state of prudishness. It is also rumored that this talented young beauty is hardly less at liberty than a fairy princess imprisoned in an ogre's castle; yet, because of the unimpeachable position of her pseudo-hostess, no hint of scandal is breathed concerning a recent, intriguing "corporation" consummated by a group of élite directors. But, my dears, if you could have seen and heard what went on in the shadow of overhanging cliffs. . . .

"Damn whoever wrote that!" Whitney suddenly stopped him, and Bleeker looked up from the article with inquiry in his eyes.

"I'm sure I don't get the last of it," he said sincerely, "but I'll bet that slap at Carol covers someone's else sins!"

"It does," Whitney declared with emphasis. "And unknown to the informer, I know who's responsible! But that isn't what's troubling me. Naturally, my uncle accepts it word for word . . . and, having heard a lot of gossip about Carol, he believes the damned lie!"

"Naughty, naughty!" came a taunting reproof from the doorway, and Aline, in a *chic* riding habit, clicked her heels and saluted them with her crop. Then, catching sight of the magazine, she burst out laughing. "Are you two quarreling, or have you been doing something that's been found out? Oh, Whitney, I'm surprised at you! What will your uncle say?"

"It isn't what he *will* say, but what he has said!" Whitney grudgingly answered. "Really, Aline, I wish you wouldn't read the insulting rot!"

"Is it about *me*?" she asked eagerly. "I'd just *love* to be criticized!"

"No," said Whitney, "nor is it about Bleeker or me; but I suppose you'll devour it anyway."

Ignoring *Social Chat*, Aline caught up the morning paper, attracted by the headline the men had been discussing.

RETURNING RECTOR ATTACKS SOCIETY'S SPONSORING SINGER

"Landing yesterday from the Cunarder *Collositania*, the Rev. Gouverneur Duane, Rector of St. Timothy's Church, flailed society's latest fad in incorporating Miss Carol Drayton and furnishing funds for her musical training under the tuition of Baptiste Stratini, Director of the Opera. . . ."

She skipped through the rehashed details of the story the papers had made so much of a few months before, and found the paragraph that had prompted Whitney's fury.

"I am grieved and shocked," said Doctor Duane, "that men and women to whom my parishioners look to set an uplifting example, should countenance the conduct hinted at in a current periodical of which I thoroughly disapprove. Apt as this publication is to exaggerate, the carryings-on it chronicles at a recent beach-party, so called, are a stench in the nostrils of upright people. The revealing of the feminine form without thought of common decency is bad enough in itself, yet, coupled with this, I learn of the open acceptance of a shameless creature who is actually being trained for the public stage at the instance of those who form the very pillars of our social and spiritual structure. Sexitis looms in every line of the account which has been shown me . . . a tale of drunkenness and debauchery and worse, which is not only outrageous and reprehensible in itself but unfit for publication in the public press. I cannot condemn too strongly

the growing affiliation between the naked harlotry of the footlights and the homes of young girls already deplorably exposed to the licentious liberty afforded the forlorn young creatures so flippantly referred to as flappers. . . ."

"Why, the old monster!" Aline cried as her cheeks flushed with anger. "It's an outrage . . . and just as you said, Whit—a *damned lie!* Mummy will be furious. Everybody knows that Carol's a dear, and it's perfectly splendid, all that Stratti's done for her. I could box your old uncle's donkey ears!" And her little boot heel stamped upon the porch with tempestuous violence.

"I could myself at times," Whitney confessed. "But the devil of it is he's in deadly earnest."

"He's deadly all right!" broke in Bleeker with an amused grin.

"I'm going to show it to Mummy right away!" Aline announced as she folded the paper.

"Please . . . not yet!" Whitney objected, trying to take it from her.

"What harm?" asked Bleeker with a shrug, "the whole cottage colony knows it . . . or will in an hour or so. By all means let Mrs. R.-S. see it. . . . By the way, have you ever observed her in action, Whit? For a delicate, beautiful woman of poise, I'll say she's some tornado!"

"That's just it," objected Whitney. "It's bound to lead to a scene, and I'm sure I don't relish being the storm center of argument."

"Suit yourself!" Bleeker withdrew from the discussion.

"I might as well pack my bags and go," Whitney said to Aline. "When your mother sees these. . . ."

"Nonsense!" Aline disagreed. "Mother knows you'd nothing to do with them."

"Whit," Bleeker observed solemnly, "since you've

called me an ass so many times—and with perfect justification—I must say *you're* one now! Sorry I can't stay and chat with you two, but I've a date to trim Harry Runyon at golf."

"You couldn't trim anyone—now that there isn't any nineteenth hole!" Aline teased as Bleeker arose and sauntered toward the veranda rail.

"Show you, old dear!" Bleeker retorted, "but I'm glad you reminded me! I'll step inside and have a word with our good friend Judson first. Blessed are they who thirst, as the Rector would say! Toodle-oo, my children!"

"Stratti'll be a rip-snorting fire-dragon!" Aline forecasted as Bleeker stepped into the house and left her alone with Whitney, "but the worst of it is that Carol will be so upset. I'd like to tear these up and burn them!"

"It wouldn't do any good," he said ruefully. "The harm's done now."

"Don't take it so to heart!" Aline advised. "You're not in the least to blame and we all know there isn't really any scandal."

"Which doesn't make my position any more pleasant," Whitney reminded her. "It's been hard enough with Carol anyway, and it's going to be harder still to face her now . . ."

"Whit," said Aline slowly, "you're lots older than I am, and in some ways, I suppose, you think you're very wise . . . but there are no wise men we debbies can't see clean through. I know you like a book. You know I do! Haven't we been such splendid pals that everyone in our set thinks we're going to be married?"

"Why yes," he admitted in sudden embarrassment. "Of course . . . even I've always sort of taken that for granted."

"Don't be so utterly silly!" she laughed at him. "We don't have to deceive ourselves, do we? You know I don't want to marry you, and you're only afraid that

you ought to marry me! Now let your luggage stay where it is and come for a canter with me. . . .”

“I think I’d best go over and see the Rector. I believe he’s at the hotel at Narragansett. . . .”

Aline gave him a grimace. “Do you mean that five seconds after I’ve decided not to be your wife, you’re going to try to bamboozle him into letting you marry Carol?”

“Why, Aline!” he stammered, his flush growing deeper beneath his tan.

“Of course that never entered your head!” she taunted sarcastically. “Being a girl of engageable age, I’d naturally not be suspicious when my life-long lover falls in love with another girl!”

“Now *you’re* being silly!” he accused her defensively. “You know I can’t ask Carol—even if I wished to—after this rotten mess!”

“A preaching uncle *is* a handicap, isn’t he?” Aline said saucily. “Come on, let’s get the horses. . . . I want to talk to you.” Then as she slipped her arm through his and looked up into his face, she asked him very gently, “Are you really quite mad about her?”

“Yes,” he answered simply . . . earnestly.

“Then *that’s* settled!” Aline announced with decision. “Whit, I’m going to do all I can to help you win her!”

“You perfect peach of a pal!” he cried in enthusiasm, and caught her in his arms. “Just for being a game little sport . . . I’m going to kiss you!”

She flung both arms about his neck and he lifted her a little, caressing Aline with affection born of a deep regard and a true delight in the girl.

Just as he did so, Bleeker stepped out on the porch. “Well, I’ll be damned!” he exclaimed as the two walked away, their heads close together as they laid their pleasant plans. Then, with a start, Bleeker saw Carol standing by the French window of the music room, and his expression changed.

"I beg your pardon!" he asked of Carol, but the plea seemed idiotic . . . inadequate. Yet aware as he was of what she had seen, there was nothing else he could say. Comment would have been odious . . . uncalled for.

"Oh, it isn't at all necessary," Carol answered, quickly trying to conceal her discomposure, yet succeeding little better than Bleeker did in hiding his amazement.

Then, before he could put himself at his ease, a step sounded at the far end of the veranda and Bleeker saw Stratini, immaculate in his flannels, staring with amusement after Aline and Whitney. Instantly the impresario grew conscious of the crushed look in Carol's eyes, and a curious light of satisfaction dawned in his own. But he pretended to vent his wrath upon Bleeker.

"Gramercy!" he protested with mock severity, "have you been ruffling my songbird's feathers?"

"I'm afraid I swore before her!" Bleeker assumed an air of mocking meekness.

"Shocking!" reproved Stratini, and Carol forced a smile.

"You should hear Signor Stratini give me a music lesson!"

"Really?" grinned Bleeker. "Well, I *must* be toddling. . . ." But as he spoke he recalled that the path he meant to take was the one along which Aline and Whitney had disappeared. "Hang it!" he made an excuse to delay. "I've forgotten something. . . . Oh, now I remember what it is. . . . I need another drink."

V.

"AREN'T you well?" demanded Stratini, knocking the ash from his long Russian cigarette. They were his pets, and increasing difficulty in obtaining them made him all the more bitter a foe of Bolshevism. Little things like that annoyed him immeasurably. "Then what *is* the matter?" he insisted when she proved reticent.

"Yes, I am well," she answered at last. "Nothing is the matter . . . in fact, nothing matters . . . now!"

"Bah!" he affected disgust and ignorance of her trouble. "You sleep too late . . . you stay up too late . . . you eat too much . . . and work too little! You expect to be a star, yet you will not be a slave. You demand worship too soon! You wish to be a butterfly even before you have wings. Wait! Later on, when I have coated them with the asbestos of experience, you may flit through the flame of passion without scorching their delicate texture."

But she did not appear to heed him, and listlessly seated herself in a wicker chair. Stratini, too, was gazing out over the lawn, wondering how best to handle this new situation, created, he thought, by Carol's resentment at Whitney's desertion. It even surprised the maestro a trifle. . . . Perhaps it was not serious. Few love affairs were, he recalled.

Then, picking up the opened copy of *Social Chat* he skimmed through the breezy item with frank distaste, yet the notice seemed to amuse him. But a moment later, as he put it down, the heading of Doctor Duane's interview arrested his eye, and a cloud of thunderlike fury crossed his features as he slowly perused it. Naturally, he assumed that Carol had seen it, and now he

realized, or thought he knew, the cause of her upset condition. It had not been Whitney after all, but his canting elderly uncle!

"So!" Stratini exclaimed, out of temper, "you are upset about this fool Duane!"

Resenting his tone, and supposing he spoke of Whitney, Carol glared at him angrily, deeply hurt at his attitude in spite of her utter misery.

"Sheer absurdity!" he went on irately. "How Mrs. R.-S. and Aline can tolerate the contemptible cad is beyond me! He's unworthy of your notice . . . I forbid you to give him another thought. . . . I, Stratini! If he causes you more unhappiness, I'll throttle him with my own hands . . . and relish the doing of it. I've not Medici blood in my veins for nothing!"

"Don't!" cried Carol indignantly . . . helplessly, resenting his characterization of Whitney, and totally unaware that Stratini condemned the Rector. "I can't and I *won't* listen to you talk like that! And I can't blame him. . . . Oh, I thought . . . but what difference can it make *what* I thought! I should never have entered into this absurd arrangement . . . and . . . I can't go on! My heart isn't in the work."

"It isn't that your heart isn't in the work," he sneered. "It is rather that something else is in your heart. Love affairs are not good for art. Emotions are worse. Be callous. What do you care what people say or think? Suppose this man *has* said ridiculous, uncalled for things . . . "

"I can't believe that he *could* have said anything unkind!" she protested loyally, not even suspecting the stories Stratini had read and thinking only of the man she loved . . . the man whom she now knew she loved more than ever.

"That depends upon what you term unkind!" shrugged Stratini, glancing toward the newspaper and wondering how she could speak so absurdly.

"I'd rather not discuss the subject." She tried to

change the topic. "You've all been wonderfully kind . . . and it's been a delight to work with *you*. At first, I was supremely happy, confident of my ability to succeed . . . then my hopes faded like a mist in the morning. I might have known my paradise couldn't last . . . that sooner or later he would find out, or . . . suspect. . . ."

"You mean that this man Duane knows something about you . . . a serious something that you've never mentioned to me?" he charged her angrily.

"I'm afraid so," she hung her head, not daring to meet his disapproving scrutiny.

"I'm sorry," he said very softly . . . almost feelingly . . . yet with a fatherly air, resentful of her deception. It hurt, and she could not face him.

Then her whole being changed, and a spirit of defiance swept her into a flare of self-assertion. "*I'm not sorry! I'm glad!*" she cried as she cast all caution from her. "Time and time again I've known that I couldn't continue—living a lie to you all! Oh, I've hated myself for not telling you the truth . . . the whole contemptible business! I'd have given anything if I *had* drowned myself in the river that night . . . before I lost my courage to take my life . . . and wandered back to sing outside that window! It would have saved a lot of heartbreaks . . . and heartbreaks are harder to bear than hunger . . . or death!"

She shuddered and twisted her handkerchief with nervous fingers, too deeply moved to cry . . . almost beyond all caring.

"Why not go to your room?" he suggested kindly, sympathy getting the better of his iron will to discipline her further. After all, he thought, he might drive the girl too far. "Lie down and rest a little . . . let me ask Mrs. R.-S. to come to you. She will understand my dear . . . a woman like that would."

"I don't want her advice . . . nor your sympathy either!" she raged at him. "I'm through with it all,

do you hear me? I'm through . . . through . . . *through!*" And her voice ended in almost a shriek as she quickly arose, facing Stratini with fury as her heart overflowed. "Besides," she added with a sob she could not control, "Aline loves him . . . and his uncle would not consent to our marriage anyway!"

"Sapristi!" he cried in impatience, berating his all too obvious stupidity. "Here I have been speaking of the uncle, and all the while you imagine I mean young Whitney! Oh, I *am* a great numskull! My child, I beg your pardon; but when you have read these articles, I think you will understand."

Then, indicating the paper and the open magazine, he turned on his heel and went into the house, leaving her to stare after him in uncomprehending amazement.

Convulsively her fingers clutched at the chair, and for a time she merely gazed across the lawn, trying her best to control herself and succeeding rather poorly. But gradually a curiosity to know what Stratini meant caused her slowly to examine the paper. Catching sight of the article, she read it through without pausing, her eyes bulging as its full sense dawned upon her. Desperate, cut to the quick by the article's inference, and realizing that the charges were made by Whitney's relative, she tore the offending sheet across, and throwing it to the porch, stamped on it in her tantrum. Then, turning to *Social Chat*, she read the other insult . . . more than she could bear . . . and with a low moan she sank down in a heap in the chair.

Stunned as she sat there, dazed by the blow of this crowning unkindness, Carol was unaware of Judson peering at her from the French window. Obviously, he had been listening, and from the half-erased expression of boldness on his usually placid countenance, it was evident that he knew what had so upset Carol.

"Shall I serve breakfast here?" he asked, watching her narrowly, as a cat may stalk a bird; and approach-

ing her chair, he began to arrange the napery of the little table set at her elbow.

"No!" said Carol sharply, resenting the man's intrusion, yet giving no heed to the servant's movements. Her lack of interest afforded the chance he sought, and with a deft, guarded movement, his hand slipped into the workbag which dangled by its ribbon from Carol's arm. In an instant he was at attention, the alert and perfect butler again. Yet there was craftiness in his pretended respect, and calculation in his carefully put question.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but I wondered whether a man like me could get incorporated?"

Despite her dejection, Carol realized the oddness of his remark . . . seemed to sense its portent. "Why?" she looked up, noncommittally.

"Mr. Bleeker says that anyone who's incorporated can break laws," he replied with apparent incredulity.

"I'm sure I don't know, Judson," Carol dismissed his presumption, "and I'm not at all interested. . . ."

"But," the butler persisted, "Mr. Bleeker said that your being incorporated keeps you from getting in bad with this dame, Mrs. Grundy."

Carol's eyes flashed at his calm impudence, yet something warned her to guard her reproof. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand. . . ." But her manner plainly showed her apprehension.

"Then suppose I speak plainly, Miss," Judson suggested self-confidently. "The night you fainted in the court-yard, I helped Mr. Bleeker to his car when he went away. In getting out his gloves, I found a lady's handbag in the pocket of his coat . . . and this dropped out of it. . . ."

Staring as though she had seen a ghost, Carol recognized the printed slip the man held out toward her. Now she knew what had happened to that abominably precious sheet the whereabouts of which had caused her such concern. She wanted to deny its ownership, yet

she wished to snatch it from him . . . to tear it to bits and destroy the thing forever. But that would not serve since Judson was aware of what was written on it. Observing her all too evident perturbation, Judson indulged in a smug smile and continued blandly.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss," he said with insufferable insinuation, "I didn't mean to keep this and no one knows I have it. You see it's not made out in the name of Miss Drayton, and only lately I thought to myself that it might belong to you."

Then, as though restoring a dropped trinket of insignificant worth, the butler handed Carol her certificate of release from the Reformatory.

Holding it with trembling fingers, Carol shuddered as she stared at the slip of paper . . . reading again the fictitious name she had given at the time of her arrest. Of course Judson knew it was hers. He had overheard what was said one afternoon at tea, and other gossip at least had undoubtedly reached his ears. Now there was no doubt in his mind and he knew that she dared not deny her identity . . . that she must admit to him her criminal record. How much better it would have been if she had been frank with them all! But now it was too late, and with a sigh she crumpled the sheet in her palm.

With an effort she pulled herself together and met his unpardonable scrutiny with a steady stare. "I don't know what you want," she said to him quietly, "but if blackmail's in your mind—you're wasting time." Her tone was cold, distant, but determined.

"No offense meant, ma'am," he hastened to deny. Then in low suggestive voice, he went on as he leaned a little nearer over the breakfast table, pretending to take her order. "I was just thinking I might be able to help . . . that maybe I ought to tell you I know about this . . . ah, matter. . . ."

"Since you do," she said defiantly, "make the most of it! If you're impudent again, I shall see that you're

discharged." And with a hasty movement, she slipped the little paper into her open workbag. That seemed to amuse him, but he did not presume to answer her, and only silently bowed.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he apologized as he walked toward the house with dignity. "I hope you'll forgive me for speaking about . . . your property."

Alone on the veranda, the last vestige of Carol's composure deserted her, and for several moments she sat there in silence, trying her best to think. Why he had given the paper to her, she could not quite understand, yet the fact that he knew what it was sufficed for his purpose. And she knew he would not hesitate to take advantage of his knowledge . . . but if he did, if blackmail *was* his motive, she would not even attempt to force him to hold his tongue . . . no matter what might result.

Slowly her fingers sought the certificate amid the jumble of fabrics and silk skeins which filled her bag, and suddenly a gleam of horrified surprise came into her eyes as she touched something hard amid the softness. Half-hesitating, looking about to make sure that no one was near, she drew out a string of emeralds and crushed them into her lap. That one faint glimpse of the stones was sufficient. The necklace was Estelle's. That she could have put it there was of course incredible. So it was only possible that the butler had placed them. Carol tried to call out, to summon him back . . . to accuse him . . . and then she laughed aloud. In view of what he knew, of what he could readily prove, what chance had she to accuse the man? He would brand her as a thief before she could tell her story, and no matter what *his* record might be, the truth about hers would be plain.

Then, in a panic of fear, she quickly hid the jewels, tightly drawing the string of her workbag. A hail from the lawn and the patter of boots on the steps . . .

and a moment later Aline was running across the veranda.

"So you're up at last!" she called out gayly. "I heard you singing out like a lark as you splashed in the tub. Does Stratti insist on those awful cold baths?" she added with a shiver.

"They're to wash my sins away . . . to chill my soul, I guess!" Carol answered with absent bitterness.

Aline laughed and then caught sight of the workbag. "Knitting? Let's see the pretties. . . ."

Startled, almost desperate, Carol clutched it to her. "Not yet . . . it's a secret!" she evaded, but her eyes dropped and she knew that her cheeks were burning.

"Oh, that's it!" laughed Aline. "Now I understand . . . you're making the Rector a pair of comfy bedroom slippers . . . a little token of appreciation of the publicity he's given you, eh?"

"You saw it?" asked Carol nervously, yet relieved that Aline was not insistent.

"Of course," Aline replied, affecting to make light of the matter. "Isn't it exciting? Maybe Stratti'll challenge him to a duel!" Then she sighed in mock misery. "I do wish someone'd publish some scandal about *me*. It must be just glorious to be talked about . . . and all I get are talkings *to* . . . from Mummy!"

Carol smiled . . . wanly, but she could not bring herself to speak.

But Aline flung herself into the swing and began to beat a tattoo on the toes of her polished boots. "Now, honor bright, Carol Drayton," she shook her crop at the other girl, "if I tell you a secret will you agree never to breathe a word? It's about Whitney," she went on excitedly, "and I'm the happiest girl in the world!"

"I promise," Carol said, suppressing a sigh as she avoided the gaze of Aline's sparkling eyes.

"Well," Aline announced with an air of relief, "we're *not* going to be married!"

"You're not? . . . " Carol exclaimed in doubting amazement . . . "why, I thought. . . ."

"Of course you thought so," Aline agreed. "Everyone did . . . and I was just a little bit afraid he'd insist myself."

"Afraid so?" Carol gasped, wonderingly.

"Yes, afraid!" Aline confirmed impishly. "Whitney's wonderful . . . but we've known each other ever since I can remember. We couldn't possibly be happy married . . . to each other. I even know how he likes his eggs and how much sugar he takes . . . and he thinks I drink entirely too many cocktails. Ugh! So we talked it all over this morning and sealed the breaking of our reputed engagement with a kiss."

"This morning?" It began to dawn upon Carol . . . and she seemed to understand the embrace she had seen. "To tell you the truth, my dear, I *saw* Whitney kiss you . . . and naturally I imagined something else. . . ."

"What's a kiss between friends?" shrugged Aline. "Even the Rector says one should turn the other cheek. But, Carol, I'm as delighted as a newly made divorcée! Whit and I are going to be perfectly good friends . . . and now that we know we're not in love we can have such *splendid* times!"

"Aline!" Carol reproved. "Surely you can't mean that! Why, dear, it's nothing more than a lovers' quarrel. . . ."

"Don't be such a gloom-caster!" Aline pouted. "The decree's final, and you needn't go about looking like a funeral any more. Register happiness, can't you?"

"It's not in my repertoire," Carol shook her head.

"Nonsense!" snapped Aline impatiently, and sat herself on the arm of Carol's chair. "You're older than I am, dear . . . you don't mind my saying that? . . . and Whit is too . . . and you're both supposed to be ever so wise and experienced . . . but I can't understand you sometimes! Why, Whit must be growing

senile or something . . . otherwise he'd have taken you by storm long ago . . . cave-man stuff if necessary. . . ."

Carol smiled and put her hand on Aline's with a little shake of her head. "I can hardly imagine Whitney as a cave-man," she said, "his clubs are very exclusive but by no means menacing. And if he *did* resort to prehistoric methods, he wouldn't be likely to drag me off to his lair. . . ."

"Because of his ogre uncle?" Aline suggested.

"Perhaps," assented Carol, "but in any event, I'd run away, the very first chance that came. . . ."

"You wouldn't! Carol Drayton, you *know* you're in love with Whit!"

"Sometimes," Carol said softly, "a woman loves a man *too much* to marry him."

"Not in our set," Aline contradicted. "A girl's more likely to *do* it to punish him."

"You're incorrigible!"

"No . . . merely eligible . . . and indifferent!" Aline explained. "Even if the next season *will* be my third. Just as Stratti says, I'm a wise foolish virgin. That's why I know that I don't love Whit, and why I know you do. Honestly, why *won't* you marry him?"

"Aline, I can't explain . . . but it's *quite* impossible. . . ."

"Nonsense! Whitney isn't a saint, even if the Rector is his uncle!"

"But even hardened sinners demand spotless wives," Carol reminded her. . . ."

"Oh, you needn't pretend you're so fascinatingly fast. I know you too well!"

"But why discuss it?" Carol said. "He's never likely to ask me. . . ."

"Oh, yes, he is!" declared Aline. "In fact I made him promise. . . ."

"Aline!" Carol shrank back. "I know you only wish

to make me happy, but won't you *please* believe me when I say it's out of the question?"

"Not unless you tell me why," Aline insisted. "Carol, you know I'm as fond of you as I could be of my own sister . . . and we're all proud of your progress . . . and the things you're going to do. You don't suppose *we* care what the Rector says, do you? Naturally *not*. But it isn't fair to stifle your heart and not tell *me* what's the matter."

"I've often wanted to, Aline," Carol said with emotion. "But it would be the hardest of all to explain to you. Now, it wouldn't do any good. I ought never to have come into your mother's house without making a clean breast of it all . . . and now I suppose you'll think me ungrateful and unprincipled . . . but I must go away, dear."

"*Good night!*" exclaimed Aline. "First Whitney and then you! Are you *both* crazy?"

Carol shook her head. "It's because I can't uphold my end of the bargain," she went on. "I'm afraid I haven't the stamina to become even a mediocre *artiste*. To keep on trying is only to waste Signor Stratini's time . . . and my incorporators' money . . . and to eat out my own heart by remaining here."

Aline bent very close and put her arms about her. "Won't you let me share your secret?" she begged persuasively.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't understand," Carol said. "And I'd rather have you think of me as you do. You've never suffered, Aline . . . and I hope you never will . . . as I have! You've never known what it means to be hungry . . . to have something in your life that you want to conceal . . . a secret you're deathly afraid will come out!"

"I think I could understand . . . if you wished to tell me," Aline sympathized, "but I don't mean to be prying. I only want you to know that we all *want*

you here . . . that we love you because you're you . . . that we feel you *belong* to us!"

"I've thought of that too," Carol said, "not in the way you put it, Aline, but that I almost literally belong to you all! I've accepted your conditions and your money, your food and your clothes. . . ."

"Carol, *don't!*" Aline protested, hurt rather than angry. "We've so much and we've given so little that such things don't even count."

"But they do . . . they must," Carol insisted. "You've made an investment in me . . . blindly, it's true . . . but nevertheless I'm nothing more than a piece of property . . . a corporation in which you hold the legal control. The disheartening part is the knowledge that I'm a disappointment . . . to myself and to you! No, dear, the songbird's about to sing her swan song . . . *before the overture!*"

"You're not yourself this morning," Aline tried to comfort her. "And you mustn't get yourself into such a frame of mind. Songbird stock's going to go up . . . and you're going up to the altar . . . with Whitney Duane!"

"Forgive me for being a baby!" Carol smiled through her tears. "But even if I go on, you must forget about Whitney. The articles of incorporation forbid my marriage within three years. . . ."

"You forget that Whit's a lawyer!" Aline teased. "He drew the document. No doubt he knows how to undo it. But if he can't, I'll buy the controlling interest myself. Then I'll *vote* you into matrimony!"

"You're a dear!" Carol said eagerly, but the sudden appearance of Judson interrupted the two.

"Pardon, Miss Aline," the butler said stiffly, "but your mother would like to see you."

"I'll be there shortly," Aline tossed over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Miss," added Judson, "but Madam has just 'phoned the Rector, asking him to come over . . . and she'd like to see you before he arrives."

"Say I'll be there at once!" Aline answered humorously, winking slyly at Carol. "Something tells me there'll be fireworks before evening!"

"I hope not!" Carol said quickly, catching her breath as she thought of the coming interview; but a sidelong glance at Judson advised her that silence was best. "But," she said quietly to Aline, "if I were not quite so weary, I'd like to meet the Rector . . . more than ever now!"

"Why try to achieve his acquaintance?" Aline asked flippantly. "Most of us are born to it or have it thrust upon us. If you're going to your room, I'll be up when I've talked with Mummy."

Carol nodded, but as Aline went into the house, Judson turned to her. "Signor Stratini is asking for you in the music room," he told her.

Contempt for the servant and reluctance to face her maestro swept over Carol. "Tell Signor Stratini I cannot come . . ." she told the servant, but he slowly shook his head.

His eyes left hers and fixed themselves meaningly upon Carol's workbag.

"Don't you think you'd be safer in there . . . warbling a bit with him?" he advised, and intently watched her reaction.

Carol's form stiffened and her fingers clenched. "Then you *did* slip those jewels into my bag!" she accused. "Judson, *you stole* that necklace, and your absurd imagination makes you believe I'll help you. . . ."

"Ain't we birds of a feather?" he asked her menacingly, looking over his shoulder suspiciously. "I'm only asking you to hold the pretties a while. . . ."

"You thief!" she shot him a look of scorn, but he brazenly laughed in her face.

"Now don't be so high and mighty!" he warned. "We've both done time and we're going to work together. You squeal on me and . . ."

But a step behind him silenced the man and he stiffened quickly as Bleeker staggered onto the porch, his step uncertain and his eyes slightly glazed. "Judson, you old devil!" he said thickly, "I've been lookin' everywhere for you. I wish you'd mix . . ."

"You look all mixed up now," Carol accused him as she observed his condition; yet the forced lightness of her remark afforded her infinite relief . . . any interruption was preferable to being alone with the butler.

"Right away, sir," Judson bowed, keeping his eyes upon Carol and signaling her to be silent. "I was just straightening up before the Rector arrives."

"Dominie coming?" grinned Bleeker stupidly. "Then maybe I'd better straighten up myself. Cocktail'll do it, Judson, or maybe a brandy and soda . . . there's a good man." Then as the butler departed, Bleeker turned to Carol, swaying a little unsteadily, and looking rather sheepish. "Had a date to play golf with Runyon, but every time I've started, I found I'd forgotten something. . . ."

"If you remember much more you won't be able to carry it all," Carol warned him, eager to get to her room before the butler returned, yet loath to leave Bleeker alone in his present condition. It was almost revolting, pitiful, she thought, and her heart went out to him. But in the same instant a sudden fear seized her. Suppose his irresponsible tongue should take up her case. Loyal as he was, and splendid as he had been, he might only make matters worse if he should try to defend her, and no doubt the butler could pump him without any effort.

If Bleeker had been himself she felt that she would have told him about the necklace, thrown herself on his mercy and begged him to come to her aid. But now that was impossible, and she wished to be by herself, to figure out calmly and quickly what was best to be done. Of course the jewels must be restored to Estelle, but

the problem was how to do it without involving herself; how to checkmate Judson and not become implicated.

Bleeker steadied himself by the veranda rail. "Some-thin's always interferin' when I want to pay my respects t' th' minishter . . ." he bemoaned, half humorously. Then he waved his hand foolishly toward the window of the music room, and, turning, Carol saw Stratini looking out at them.

"Are we ready?" the maestro asked, with a frown in Bleeker's direction.

"Stratti!" Carol appealed with a weary gesture, "*please* don't ask me now! You must know I'm upset. . . . Don't ask me to sing, but sit with me. . . . I want to *talk* with you."

"What absurdity!" he exclaimed, as he came toward her. "Is it not understood that our program must stand? A thousand devils! I give you a little liberty and you promptly grow lazy . . . you want to be pampered and petted. Bah!"

"But, Stratti!" she halted him earnestly. "There's something I *must* say. . . ."

"It will keep!" he shrugged. "I have said we will have a lesson . . . therefore *we will have a lesson*. I will not be put off. If you will not practice, how can you hope to be more than a ragged street singer!"

Furious at his deliberate taunt, Carol stamped her foot. "Go on . . . revile me! Humiliate me . . . remind me of what I was! It is time you learned that I too have a will!"

He laughed at her, mockingly. "Say rather a diabolical willfulness! You are suffering from senseless sentimentality. Have I not forbidden you even to dream of the future . . . told you to live in the present . . . and work? Come, now . . . ignore this absurd slander . . . put love and marriage out of your mind. . . ."

"Love and marriage!" Carol repeated with bitterness. "Is everyone mad on the subject? First I am

urged to marry . . . told that I will be forced . . . then you forbid me even to think of it!"

Angrily, Stratini glared at Bleeker. "Are *you* filling her head with such notions?"

"Not I!" he denied with fuddled fervor. "Now what the devil's detaining that butler?"

But Stratini ignored him as he wheeled upon Carol. "Then it *is* Whitney!" he charged her, out of patience. "I tell you to *forget* the man!"

"But, Stratti, won't you listen . . . won't you let me . . . ?"

"No! . . . I say we will *sing*!" he thundered. "We waste time . . . and I am waiting!"

Rudely he caught her by the arm and tried to push her toward the music room window.

"I say!" protested Bleeker, "don't be too rough with her, Stratti!"

"Go to the devil!" the impresario snapped, and his face clouded with rage as Carol eluded his hold.

"I won't sing!" she screamed at him, her eyes flashing wildly, and her body trembling with anger. "I tell you I won't. You can't make me sing!"

"Bah!" exclaimed the maestro, seizing her in both arms. "Since you behave like an infant, I shall have to chastise you!"

"Now really!" Bleeker began as Carol's shrieks rang out and Stratini carried her kicking and squirming into the house, "You're going a bit too far. . . ."

But Stratini only glared through the glass at him as he put Carol down, and slammed the French windows in Bleeker's face with a bang.

"Well, what d'you think of that?" Bleeker stared in amazement; then finding a wicker fan-chair, composed himself for a nap.

VI.

MOPPING his brow as he stepped from a taxicab, the Reverend Gouverneur Duane flecked the dust from the high-cut clerical waistcoat of his gray mohair suit and fussily felt the front of his churchman's collar. Beaming upon the liveryman, he gave him a benediction as he fished a tiny tip from the depths of his change purse. Benignly he bestowed it, and the chauffeur touched his cap as he swore beneath his breath and stepped on the gas.

Then, as the Rector pompously mounted the broad stone steps, Judson appeared in the doorway. He had hardly expected this guest so soon, and on the tray he held was Bleeker's brandy and soda. But Bleeker was nowhere in evidence, being completely concealed by the back of the fan-chair in which he was dozing. Aware of the minister's aversion to liquor, Judson was disconcerted, but only for a moment; then presence of mind rescued him from his sudden dilemma. Appearing to slip as he bowed the distinguished arrival, the butler let the tray and its burden drop to the floor with a crash.

"Why, Judson!" Doctor Duane exclaimed, a trifle suspiciously, "How very unfortunate!"

"I'll fetch another, sir, as soon as I've announced you," the butler thanked him. "The day was warm, my lord, and I thought you might relish a glass of lemonade."

"Excellent, excellent, Judson!" the Rector rubbed his hands. He liked being addressed as "my lord" and his throat was somewhat parched. Respectful little attentions like this rubbed him the right way, and he sank into a chair with a sigh of satisfaction. It was cool beneath the striped awning, and the landscape

was inviting, but the journey over had been most warm. So, without observing what he did, he picked up a copy of *Social Chat* and began to fan himself.

But almost instantly he jumped up as Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant appeared, visibly out of humor despite her studied calm. Replacing a letter in its envelope, she came toward her caller with cool courtesy, and formally offered the Rector her hand. "Have I kept you waiting?" she asked with absent thoughtfulness as Doctor Duane placed a chair. Then, observing the bit of ice and shattered glass she raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"The good man was bringing me mild refreshment . . . and upset it," the Rector apologized for the butler. "Faithful soul . . . his intentions were of the best."

Mrs. R.-S. was not quite so sure, since she scented the brandy, but at least she gave Judson credit for being a well-trained servant.

"How fresh and charming you look in that dainty frock!" the Rector enthused admiringly. "You hardly seem any older than our dear Aline . . . whom I trust is quite well?"

"I feel like Methusaleh's mother this morning!" Mrs. R.-S. said with a frown. "Pardon me just a moment . . . Oh, Judson. . . ."

"Yes, Madam," the butler paused in picking up the débris.

"There is a gentleman in the library waiting for me. It may be that he will ring for you, and perhaps wish to speak to the rest of the household. . . ."

Judson started perceptibly, then quickly recovered his poise, and nodded his head gravely as he went into the house. For a moment Mrs. R.-S. looked after the man, a note of uncertainty clouding her piquant features; but with an effort she endeavored to free her mind of its burden and turned to try to pick up the thread of what she had said to the Rector.

"*Do sit down!*" she exclaimed with suppressed irritation, as Doctor Duane paced to and fro with his hands clasped behind his back. "I am somewhat at a disadvantage," she explained in extenuation. "A series of most distressing things have completely upset me. . . ."

"So what more natural than that you should send for me!" the Rector said, composing himself by her side.

"*Quite* natural!" she answered with obvious irony, "since you are one of the causes of my annoyance. . . ."

"I?" he asked unbelievably, then flushed as he caught the title of the weekly on his lap. "I trust that we are not to disagree concerning this vulgar sheet. . . ."

"Did you bring it here for discussion?" she asked him bluntly.

"Mercy, no!" he protested. "I found it . . . on your table. . . ."

"It belongs in the waste basket!" Mrs. R.-S. said. "But I did not ask you to come to speak of *Social Chat*. . . ."

"I have frequently scored it in my public utterances . . . " he began virtuously.

"It is your latest public utterance which prompted my 'phone call," she told him. "Do you imagine that I will permit you to criticize me and my guests . . . unjustly?"

"But *is* my criticism unjust?" he asked reproachfully.

"Well, frankly," she challenged, "*Is it?*"

"Now we shall come to an amicable conclusion," he beamed. "I have long hoped for this moment. . . ."

"I hope it will be a long time before you forget it!" she interrupted, her patrician eyes flashing fire. "I could hardly restrain myself when I read the morning papers, and despite my invariable rule, I was greatly tempted to answer you in kind. . . ."

"Surely you do not mean publicly to assume the rôle

of champion . . . ” he began, horrified, but she silenced him with a gesture.

“For a long time I have patiently borne with your nagging reproofs,” she reminded him quietly, and with ominous calm. “I have invited you to my home, not only as my Rector, but as my friend. . . .”

“Of which I am deeply sensible,” he assured her . . . uneasily.

“You know that our views are unlike . . . on certain points. . . .”

“Then let us strive to make them coincide,” he suggested soothingly.

“I am afraid that is impossible,” she said icily. “Yet despite that fact, I am a woman of the Church . . . of the church over which *you* preside. I will not forsake that church; it means too much to me. I shall sit under your pulpit as long as you confine your preachments to religion and do not dabble in personal matters which do not concern you. . . .”

“I dare not dwell on the sadness of your pew being empty!” he interrupted, the picture of utter dejection. It was true . . . such desertion would be disastrous, since it would be followed by the families of half of his vestry.

“I myself would regret such a course,” she told him plainly, “but it is high time you and I had a thorough understanding. You do not approve of my actions . . . I do not approve of your methods. Moreover, I will not tolerate your attitude toward my friends and my protégées. After what I have read just now, I shall not be at home to you from this time on, Doctor Duane.”

“But, my dear . . .” he held out his hands beseechingly, and then blushed as a voice at his elbow made him realize his supplicating posture.

“The lemonade, sir,” Judson offered a tray.

“*Confound* the lemonade!” exploded the flustered

clergyman, coughing behind his hand to conceal his embarrassment.

"That will be all, Judson," his hostess came to the rescue, and the butler softly withdrew, not without an inward sense of gratification, in spite of his present uneasiness.

"You scourge me deeply!" the Rector bemoaned at last. "I merely endeavor to do my duty according to my lights. . . ."

"Your lights seem different from those of the Bishop!" she reminded him sharply. "Only this morning I received a delightful note from him, and I think it might be well if I read you a part of it."

She paused to unfold the vellum and the Rector squirmed in his chair uncomfortably. Bishop Rhinebeck's views were all too well known to him, but he made no effort to speak as Mrs. R.-S. found the paragraph and began to read it to him.

"'I am cheered by the fact that I find no alarming hint of Sodom nor of Gomorrah in our modern social circles. Laxity of morals, dear lady, must always be comparative; and times are changing. . . . I think for the better. Of course, there are erring ones among the best of people, just as we know there are good folks among the worst. You know that I have no patience with self-styled reformers who cry out from the house-tops that the whole of our beautiful world is steeped in iniquity. . . .'"

She paused and the Rector pursed his lips. "The Bishop, of course, is entitled to his opinion. . . ."

"And am I not entitled to mine?" she cut him short. "You apparently do not think so. Your statements in this newspaper are not only an insult to me, but a gross affront to my friends . . . and to Miss Drayton!"

"You know I cannot condone any affiliation with the stage. . . ."

"I am not asking you to condone anything. I am demanding that you hold your scurrilous tongue!"

He winced, but he would not recede from his trenches. "Really, you are doing inestimable harm in your semi-adopting of this singer. . . ."

"Who made *you* my keeper?" she demanded irately.

"Let us rather say—spiritual guardian," he corrected. "It has a less harsh sound."

Her glance was scathing, and she bit her lip to hide a contemptuous smile.

"I am quite competent to regulate my own morals and to place my own interpretation on those of my household," she informed him in a calmer but no less decisive tone. "When I wish your advice I shall ask it."

"Yet you will not deny the truth in the matter," he urged. "Is it not the case that this charming villa has been the scene of gambling and carousing . . . of intoxicated revels . . . of midnight bathing scandals and . . ."

"Are you quite aware of what you are suggesting?" Mrs. R.-S. asked warningly.

"Since it offends you," he bowed his head, "I regret to say that I am."

"Since you have at least had the courage to say this to me personally, I shall forgive it," she said, "but I sent for you to demand a full and public apology in the columns of each newspaper that has published your insufferable insults. . . ."

"I . . . retract what I have condemned?" he gasped, with a haughty toss of his head. "What you ask is impossible. . . ."

A sonorous snore broke in on his words and increased his agitation.

"Bless me!" he cried, looking about, "what on earth was that?"

"Probably the protest of one of my guests," she

answered sarcastically, "weary, no doubt, of waiting for the lemonade Judson brought you so thoughtfully."

"Then it *was* liquor!" he straightened his shoulders militantly. "And in spite of the fact you presume . . ."

"It is *you* who presume . . . too far!" she silenced him. "Unless you make before evening, the public apology I require, I shall write to the Bishop . . . preferring charges against you."

"Charges against *me*?" he repeated incredulously.

"You have not hesitated to make them against others . . . to give the support of your censure to a baseless libel . . . and in doing so you have helped to besmirch the good name of a girl who means much to me . . . a great deal more, my dear Rector, than you and your sort of religion."

"But reflect," he tried to defend himself, almost hopelessly. "We must look to a woman in your position to set an example of propriety. . . ."

"That is my aim," she interrupted. "And I realize that the girl who looks to me to protect her reputation is entitled to demand a great deal of me . . . more than perhaps *you* imagine. Yet you have slandered her and impugned the motives of the man who is doing her an inestimable service—training her voice so that she may earn her living and give the world pleasure through her singing! If you had only directed your shafts against me, I should merely have closed my doors to you . . . trying as best I might, to reach heaven without you . . . but now the time to ignore you has passed."

Speechless, he stared at her as she slowly arose and rang for the butler. Vainly he tried to realize what she had said, to find words to persuade her; but as Judson appeared in the doorway, she turned her back on the dumfounded man.

Then, as he took his hat and stick from the servant, the Rector recovered something of his shattered dig-

nity. "I shall never cease to hope," he began in a plaintive tone, "that some day you will understand. . . ."

But a crash of chords and a torrent of foreign profanity drowned out his speech, startling him out of his senses. Hysterical screams made him shudder, and the windows of the music room were thrown open violently.

"Is someone being murdered?" the Rector stopped his ears.

"Not yet!" said Baptiste Stratini, stepping to the veranda. "Would you like to become a martyr?"

VII.

"STRATTI! . *Will* you sit down and stop glaring after the man!" Mrs. R.-S. implored him as the Rector went down the walk, bristling with pious rage despite his apparent dejection. "I'm simply at sixes and sevens because of the way things are going."

The impresario turned to her with a look of tender concern. "Forgive me," he said, "if I'm adding to your troubles; but don't be so upset over breaking with the Church."

"I *haven't* broken with the Church!" she denied earnestly. "I've merely put a canting churchman where he belongs. . . ."

"Quite so," nodded Stratini. "The Church itself is never wrong, and the world isn't topsy-turvy. The trouble's with the people who try to run both."

"But about Carol," Mrs. R.-S. went on anxiously. "Is she deeply hurt . . . or merely naughty again?"

Stratini shrugged. "The girl is distracting this morning . . . yet I can hardly blame her. Quite evidently this nonsense has made her mind run riot, so I naturally insisted on our usual practice. First she sang like a screech owl; then refused to sing at all; backed into the corner and spat at me like a wild-cat . . . with the result that you heard. But all this is nothing . . . she will get over it."

"Aline feels that she is suffering needlessly . . . brooding over some fancied trouble she will not explain," Mrs. R.-S. told him, "but I want to discuss that with you later on," she suddenly stopped as she realized the butler's presence.

"Has the gentleman in the library sent for you?" she asked.

"Not yet, Madam," Judson replied, ill at ease, but masking his nervousness admirably.

"Then ask all the servants to go there at once," she directed. "I shall wish to speak to them presently."

"Just what is all this?" Stratini asked as the butler made his exit. "And who is in the library?"

"A detective," she told him guardedly. "I 'phoned for him an hour ago. Oh, it's nothing to do with this business in the papers; in fact, it's something even more disturbing."

"Yes?" he arched his eyebrows.

She nodded. "Estelle Delancey came to my room in tears before I was up. It seems that Freddy recently gave her a string of rather valuable emeralds. They are gone."

"Hum!" Stratini mused. "That is awkward. The fair Estelle is so careless with her treasures!"

"How so?"

"Have you not read between the lines of that story in *Social Chat*?" he asked with a sardonic smile. "Don't you realize that Estelle is frightfully jealous of Carol . . . that the winsome Mrs. Delancey's claws are sharpened for me?"

"But what has that to do with her necklace?"

"Perhaps nothing . . . perhaps everything," Stratini said. "But what interests me most is the authorship of that squib in the tattle-sheet . . . the innuendo as to what went on in the shadow of overhanging cliffs. Somehow I feel that Estelle might tell us something of that."

"You mean that one of my guests would inform a scandal-mongering editor of what takes place—at my house . . . ?"

"It is not impossible," he assured her with a superior air. "Moreover, the initiation of gossip concerning another person might well serve as a cloak for a woman who's guilty herself."

"Stratti, you're too suspicious!" she reproved, un-

believingly. "Estelle is a very foolish young matron, and her condition the other night displeased me exceedingly . . . yet I cannot believe she would stoop to a thing so contemptible."

"At least say the situation is somewhat interesting," he made a careless gesture. "In the meantime, suppose we find the Raffles in our midst. . . ."

"That is my chief difficulty," Mrs. R.-S. sighed. "I cannot suspect my servants, but I am going to have them examined. It's only fair to let them prove their innocence."

He agreed. "Then each of us must submit to a similar search," he declared emphatically. "Also, I wish to have a chat with Estelle. I don't like pretty women to keep their secrets from me. . . ."

"I shouldn't care to try," she smiled at him confidently. "You're too uncannily discerning."

"We shall see!" he laughed and slipped his arm through hers. "Suppose we go in and talk with this astute detective. Perhaps his mistaken deductions will help us to solve the problem."

Hardly had they entered the living-hall when Carol peered cautiously out of the music room windows. Her nervousness was not eased in the least and her cheeks were wet with tears as she kept herself in concealment until the two had gone. Then, in a quandary, she hurried out on the porch, desperately clutching her workbag with twitching fingers. For a moment she gazed across the lawn toward the lodge gate as though contemplating flight; but that would only admit her guilt in the eyes of the others. Besides, she had nowhere to go.

In her consternation, she tore open the bag and her fingers caught at the jewels. The stones seemed to burn her flesh and she wished to be rid of them. Judson would readily lie to the detective, and if Carol were searched, her workbag would condemn her. Even without a word from the butler, the Reformatory release

and the emeralds themselves would be damning evidence against which no amount of explanation could be expected to prevail. Obviously, the thing to do was to rid herself of the bag's contents, yet despite her dislike for Estelle, she knew that she ought to return the stolen stones. Anyone who was honest, with nothing to lose, would have done so long ago . . . and the mere fact that she had kept them only made matters worse. They might not prove her a thief, but she could not prove otherwise.

Feeling herself cornered, and too distracted to think, she flung herself into the swing-seat, and burst out sobbing convulsively. Then, as she heard footsteps behind her, she quickly concealed the workbag and daubed at her eyes with her handkerchief as Whitney paused by her side.

"You're in trouble!" he said solicitously, bending over her. "Won't you let me help you, Carol dear?"

She wished he would cradle her in his arms and let her sob on his shoulder . . . listen while she told him all that was in her heart; yet she dared not yield to her desire for the comfort he might give . . . the protection he would not deny, no matter what he believed. That he would uphold her, she was certain; yet she felt with a pang that she had no right to permit him to do so. It would be bad enough when he should learn what he must know some day; but he would never believe she had been wrongly condemned if he thought her a thief in the bargain. Love her as he might . . . in the way such a man must love . . . Whitney could only pity her if she told him her story. And in neither case against her, could Carol establish her innocence. In each instance an accusing finger pointed with seeming truth, and the more she might plead her lack of guilt, the more skeptical they would be . . . for she knew that a woman once condemned is damned irrevocably. Even those who mock at morals scorn dis-

honesty. The law had proclaimed her a harlot; now circumstance branded her thief.

Pitifully lovely in her despondent grief, she looked up at him, and then cringed from his touch, gentle though it was, and the pain she read in his drawn features only cut her more deeply. She was to blame for his suffering and her yielding would mar his future; so if he persisted, only one course remained open to her. Other women had done it, and weary men who were worth while, too . . . worth while because they realized their own unworthiness. And that course was to damn herself, even in Whitney's eyes . . . to make him loathe her as ardently as it was plain that he loved her.

"Please don't talk to me now," she put off the moment she dreaded. "I want to be alone . . . to try to think a little."

"Carol, I feel like a cad!" he told her desperately. "I'd have given everything to prevent what's happened. As it is, dear, I can't tell you how unhappy it makes me . . . but I want to do what I can to prove that I care . . . more than you can imagine!"

"I wish you didn't care so much!" she said with distorted truth. It would be easier if he did not . . . yet pitifully harder!

"You don't mean that!" he protested. "I can't believe it, dear. A woman like you doesn't cling to a man as you did, and give him back kiss for kiss . . . unless she does mean it! Carol, until this morning I meant to ask you to marry me . . . and I still wish I might. . . ."

"But of course you can't . . . now!" she said with bitter misinterpretation.

"No," he agreed awkwardly, after a pause, "you're right . . . of course . . . since I've nothing to offer you."

Her eyes met his quickly, and then she understood; partly, at least, comprehended his hesitation; and her

heart laughed a little as she sensed that she had been wrong in her understanding.

"That isn't fair to yourself," she told him gently. "You'd everything to offer me . . . when you loved me. . . ."

"*When* I loved you!" he cried out in anguish. "When *haven't* I loved you . . . from that first moment I saw you, drenched and shivering as they lifted you from the fountain! But it's different now, dear . . . and I want you to understand why. . . . I haven't a cent in the world."

He looked away, shamefacedly, but a wonderful light of happiness came into Carol's eyes. "Whitney!" she cried in alarm, filled with concern for him. "You mean that because of me . . . your uncle has . . ."

"Behaved like a cruel landlord . . . like the villain in a play . . . cut me off and disowned me!" He laughed, but his mirth was bitter, because he felt that it meant losing her . . . because he blamed himself for not being independent.

"Oh, Whitney!" was all she could say, yet she thrilled at the touch of his hands as he put them on hers . . . desperately despondent, yet vaguely hopeful.

"It's absurd, of course," he went on in a matter-of-fact sort of tone, resigned, yet enraged at himself. "You see I've never taken life very seriously . . . never had to. The Duanes have never done anything but what it pleased them to do . . . and I've always considered myself the heir to a fortune too large for a man to spend reasonably. . . ."

"Do you *need* a great fortune?" she asked, but she looked away, for she could not meet his eager eyes as he answered.

"You know I do!" he said simply, and the reply surprised her . . . even hurt her a little. The declaration she dreaded was really the one she wanted . . . but it seemed he had no intention of saying a thing so foolish.

"Love in a garret's well enough for those who were born in a garret," he went on, "but happiness, like everything else, depends upon what one wants . . . the things one cares about. Of course, I shan't be a pauper. My law practice is profitable, and I can make it more so; but that will necessitate giving up polo and playing about the world. I don't mind that . . . but it means getting down to earth. . . ."

"Perhaps we'd all be better off if we did," she mused aloud. "But tell me, Whitney, when did your uncle do this . . . ?"

"Just now," he said. "A little sooner than I anticipated, but it was bound to come. I'd meant to go and see him, and he might have listened to reason . . . but of course, I had to run into him unexpectedly. He was coming down the walk on the way from here, and for a dignified clergyman, he was certainly up in the air. . . ."

"Perhaps it's not fair to blame him," she half-defended, for despite her resentment of all that the Rector had said, she could understand the view he must take of her . . . the attitude which he must maintain when the rest of the story came out.

"Oh, everyone's sick of his preaching!" Whitney exclaimed in disgust, "and I wasn't in any mood to be chastened. So I spoke to him rather frankly . . . and he flew up at once. I couldn't get a word in . . . and he told me just where I get off!"

In spite of his discomfiture and his deep-seated sense of injustice, he smiled at the memory of the scene on the walk. Almost beside himself, the Rector had snapped his walking stick like a twig as he clenched it in his pudgy hands and gave free vent to his rage. He had prophesied dire disasters and washed his hands of the world, saying that those who were bent on attaining their own destruction might dance along on their road to hell for all it mattered to him.

"I seem to have contaminated everyone!" Carol grieved ruefully.

"Carol, how can you!" he drew her closer to him. "You've made *me* very happy . . . and you'll make me happier still if I mean enough to you . . . to make you wait a little . . . until I have enough of my own to give you all you deserve . . . !"

"I'm afraid you don't really know me!" she said with a sad little smile. "I haven't always known luxuries . . . and although I suppose I've been spoiled of late . . . I'd gladly exchange material things for a little happiness. . . ."

"Wont you let me bring it to you?" he pleaded eagerly, "and let me work to give you the comforts you ought to have?"

"The comforts would come in time . . . if the other were possible," she told him regretfully, "but it isn't . . . because I'm afraid that *I* can't bring *you* happiness."

"Not if you withhold it!" he reproached her.

"I'm not doing that . . . I'm only being frank with myself . . . and you. If I dared give way to my feelings, the love you offer me would mean everything in the world . . . more than anything else you could ever give me . . . but why deceive ourselves? I *can't* marry you."

There was despondent finality in her tone, and the tearing of her heartstrings reflected itself in her eyes, but she hid them from Whitney's gaze as he drew away a little.

"Can't?" he repeated, resentfully. "There *can't* be any real reason . . . except your pride. Oh, I don't mean your refusing me because I've said that I'm poor . . . but because you're blaming yourself for something you couldn't help. The Rector's attack is unspeakable, and I mean to make him retract it!"

"Why?" asked Carol resignedly. "A little while ago . . . in my bitter anger . . . I hoped that I might

confront him! . . . but now . . . I only hope I shall never meet the man."

"Why should you?" he eliminated the need. "He has relieved me of all sense of obligation. As my wife, he would hardly venture even to mention your name!"

"That would not erase the stain he has put upon it!"

"But you *must* see his warped opinion doesn't matter to me . . . nor to any of those who love you . . . as we all do!"

"As you think you do . . . without knowing!" she silenced him with sudden decision, for she felt that she could not bear his continued pleading. Hungry as she was for his caresses, lonely as she felt in her misery, she could not risk the thrill of his touch any longer; and she pushed him away from her as she arose very slowly.

"Please, Carol!" he uttered a last appeal. "I want you to know I'm in earnest . . . more earnest than I've ever been in all my foolish life. I know I have ability, although I've concealed it well . . . and if I thought you'd wait for me, I'd work with all that's in me."

"I *want* you to do that . . . for your own sake!" she told him fondly. "But let us be sensible. Neither of us are children . . . and I have no childish illusions. No matter how far I may rise, or how deep I may sink . . . I shall never stop caring for you . . . but Whitney, dear, there are reasons why my giving in to you would be the height of folly!"

For a moment he stood before her in silence, then his eyes met hers with a look of challenge. "Very well!" he said sharply. "Since you take that attitude, why not be fair about it? I've confessed my own situation fully. If you *do* love me, you owe it to me to tell me why you won't be my wife!"

"Isn't it enough that I've told you no?" she recoiled from the confession he wished to exact.

"No, it isn't," he said. "You choose to let me infer that you've done something infamous . . . and, frankly, dear, I don't believe you. But even if that were true . . . and I know it isn't . . . there's nothing you ever *could* tell me that would make me love you the less. . . ."

"Perhaps you think so," she put him off, "but it never works out that way. At the moment, my secret's my own . . . I prefer to keep it so . . . but whether or not I tell you, you'd be bound to find out. Then, if we were married, dear . . . it *would* make a difference. Oh, I know it would, and you must know it, too! Even if you were wonderfully generous, I could never forget. . . ."

"I'll make you forget . . . this senseless bugaboo!" he pledged himself earnestly. "And it's nothing more than that, you dear . . . you know it couldn't be! Whatever you think stands in our way . . . I want you because you're you!"

"No, Whitney . . . *you'll* have to forget about me. There would be times when you'd wonder . . . and wonder leads to doubt . . . and the end of the Blue Bird trail. A man must do more than love his wife . . . he must be *sure* of her. He wants to *know* that she's all his . . . that she always has been . . . and always will be!"

"I haven't noticed it!" he scoffed, "at least not among *our* friends."

"Is *that* the sort of marriage you'd like to enter into?" she took him to task in disgust. "I'd rather give myself to you than be your wife in that way!"

"Your own words prove you're pure!" he cried exultantly. "You couldn't feel as you do if you weren't all that you should be!"

"Oh, Whitney . . . don't!" she tried to elude him in

a torture of doubt. "Can't you see, dear heart, that you're breaking mine!"

"Oh, you darling!" he cried as he caught her fiercely to him, smothering her protests with his kisses. "Now I *am* sure of you. . . ."

"Whoa, there!" came a warning laugh from the doorway, and Aline peered out at them with a joyous smile in her eyes. "If you don't desire an audience, you'd better break away. Sherlock Holmes is coming to search for the missing jewels. . . ."

"For the missing *what?*" asked Whitney, embarrassed despite his amusement over Aline's melodramatic pretense.

"Oh, you needn't think you're going to get away with it!" she turned up her nose at him. "We've all been through the ordeal . . . down to the kitchen maids . . . and since nobody had the necklace, you or Carol *must* have it."

"I don't get the big idea," Whitney said, puzzled over the serious note in her banter, and Carol closed her eyes in unbearable anguish. Just behind her on the swing, was the workbag, yet she knew she could not touch it, although it screamed at her in its mute accusation. She wished she might sink through the floor, that she might die as she stood there, and she dared not raise her head to look at Whitney.

"Oh, you'll *get* it all right!" Aline replied irrepressibly. "What do you mean by stealing things from lovely married ladies?"

Whitney laughed. "I don't know what you're talking about, you crazy little loon, but I never stole a single thing from any married . . ."

"Oh, is *that* so?" Aline shook her finger at him. "Tell it to the deteckatiff! Maybe he'll believe you!"

VIII.

"OF course you two won't mind," Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant said with a smile, as she and Stratini came out on the porch with a short, stocky man, whose features made Whitney think of a grotesque owl.

"Naturally not," he acquiesced, "Aline has just been telling us of Estelle's misfortune." And he nodded to the detective. "Go to it whenever you're ready . . . Mr. Brown, is it?"

"Thank you . . . in just a moment, Mr. Duane," the little man said, peering at Carol curiously through his bone-rimmed glasses. "I wonder if I haven't met this lady before?"

"I hardly think so," Mrs. R.-S. shook her head. "I explained to you about Miss Drayton."

"Oh, yes," the detective went on affably, but Carol found herself cringing beneath the man's curious scrutiny. She could no more remember encountering him, than he could place seeing her, yet he seemed to associate the girl with some recent incident. "I was mistaken, of course," he denied deliberately, but his effort to put her at her ease did not tend to calm Carol.

Feeling herself the center of attention and shrinking from casual glances that seemed to her shafts of suspicion, she thought she must scream at the sight of the workbag. Perhaps her inquisitor would never notice it there; then when he was gone, she could restore the jewels to Estelle's room. But even with this vain hope, the remnants of her composure fled, and the man's keen gray eyes seemed to bore her very soul.

"Would you like Miss Drayton to go to my

room?" Mrs. R.-S. inquired. "No doubt she will feel relieved when this formal search is over . . . I assume you will trust *me* to make it?"

"Shortly," he answered perplexedly, toying with his glasses. "Of course it's quite absurd, but I pride myself on my memory, and I'm wondering whether Miss Drayton would tell me about herself . . . where she was, for instance, before she came to you . . . a little, perhaps, of this matter she's keeping from you. . . ."

"This is absurd and impertinent!" Whitney exclaimed in a rage. "Are you going to permit this stranger . . . ?"

"Oh, let him alone," came a chuckle from Stratini. "His methods are rather amusing . . . and somewhat like my own."

But Carol had borne enough of the rack of the man's inquisition . . . enough of deception and torture . . . and clutching up the handbag, she cried aloud in her anguish.

"You needn't stare at me like that!" her voice rang out in her torment. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know . . . *anything* to end this!"

"Mummy, it isn't fair . . . you're brutes, all of you!" Aline stormed at them and threw her arms about Carol. "She'll be a nervous wreck if you don't let her alone . . . and besides, it's too silly for words to think that *she has* the necklace. . . ."

"I haven't the slightest desire to be rude," Brown said apologetically. "Miss Drayton seems to be making a mountain out of a molehill."

"That'll be enough!" Whitney menaced the man. "Any more hints like that and *I'll* handle this matter. I happen to be an attorney and I suggest that Miss Drayton let me reply for her. . . ."

"She isn't accused of anything, so far as I'm aware," the detective smiled at his fervor. "But

evidently Miss Drayton would rather not answer my question?"

"I really don't see why she should!" Mrs. R.-S. intervened, but Stratini drew her aside.

"It's hardly fair to hamper the man, since you've called him in. Besides, I agree with him that Carol seems rather childish. . . ." And he frowned at her disapprovingly.

"I think you're inhuman!" Aline burst out, "when you *know* her state of mind."

"Please don't bother!" Carol freed herself from her arms. "Why *shouldn't* you know where I came from . . . that perhaps he *has* seen me before . . . !" Then she clutched at her throat and paused for breath, holding onto the back of the fan-chair as she swayed with emotion.

"What the devil!" came a voice from the depths of the chair, and Gramercy Bleeker's head peered over the top at her. "How do? What's all the excitement?"

His lanky form arose from behind the wicker curtain, and he stared at the group as though puzzled to understand their tense, unaccustomed manner. For a moment no one spoke, and Gramercy lurched as he leaned toward the servant's bell.

"Where the deuce's that idiot Judson?" he muttered aloud, "been waitin' for him for an hour. . . ." Then he leaned on the pushbutton, wavering ludicrously.

"Do show an atom of sense!" Mrs. R.-S. exclaimed. "I might have known *you* were snoring there when the Rector was here."

"Now don't touch me, old top . . . I don't like it!" Bleeker turned upon Stratini with a petulant air. "Somehow I'm always missin' the Rector . . . snoozin' when he's preachin' sermons is gettin' to be a habit. . . . What?"

Impatiently, Carol knotted the cords of her work-

bag, and with an effort regained control of herself. "Why go on with this farce?" she exploded, and Bleeker grinned at her stupidly, as he ran his fingers perplexedly through his touseled hair.

"Farce?" he repeated. "'S funny! I thought it was a tragedy . . . the way you're all lookin' so glum. . . . Oh, *here* you are!" he beamed, as Judson answered the bell he had rung.

"Really, Gram!" Mrs. R.-S. stamped her foot. "I must insist. . . ."

"Now don't spoil the party!" Bleeker waved her away. "I'm gonna spring a surprise!" Then, in a twinkling, he straightened up, and the sleep in his eyes vanished as he turned upon the butler with a cynical smile. "Judson, old dear, it's a crime, and I hate to go back on a pal, but I don't like to have my drinks mixed by a sneakin' thief!"

Like a flash the butler stiffened, and fear came into his eyes; then, with unruffled calm, he smilingly bowed. "A thief, Mr. Bleeker?" he said. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me!" Bleeker shrugged, "the credit's all yours, and the fault, I'm sure. . . . If you'd made those drinks a bit stronger, I'd never have got on to you."

"Is this man *sober*?" demanded Brown, impatient at the delay, yet watching the butler intently.

"Perfectly, I'm sorry to say," Bleeker assured him. "If you're the judge and jury, why don't you ask old Judson where he hid the necklace?"

"Where *I* hid it, sir?" the butler repeated with well-feigned amazement. "Really, sir, I . . ."

"Well, *really, sir!*" Bleeker mimicked, "just suppose you tell them *where I saw you put it!*"

"I'm sure it's all Greek to me, sir . . . whatever you're talkin' about!" Judson persisted. "Madam, I appeal to you. . . ."

"You're actin' good, but it won't do!" Bleeker

interrupted, then he turned to Carol, with a twinkle in his eyes. "If you'll look in your workbag, Songbird, I think you'll find something pretty."

Carol gave vent to a sigh of relief as she realized that Bleeker must know all that had taken place. The thought that he was aware of her having been in prison did not even disturb her. Perhaps she could mitigate that offense if she was cleared of the other . . . if Bleeker's testimony proved she was not a thief. And with fingers that could hardly free its knots, she tried to open the bag, eager to rid herself of its incriminating contents.

"Surely you don't think I took them!" she implored, as she drew out the glittering string of iridescent stones. "Oh, Gramercy, tell them . . . do!"

"It's a frame-up . . . a lie!" shouted Judson throatily. "He's only tryin' to shield the girl. Why, in that very bag there's proof . . ."

But Bleeker's fist swung out and crashed into Judson's jaw, thudding his hurtling body against the wall. Grunting with pain, the butler recovered himself, groggily.

"You damned drunk!" he screamed, nursing his injury, as he braced himself for a blow, and lunged at his assailant. "I'll get you for that if they *hang* me!"

Carol screamed and the men leaped forward as the steel of an automatic gleamed in his quick moving hand; but Bleeker only chuckled as he stepped back a pace, and, making a deft motion, neatly disarmed the butler, holding his twisted arm in a vice-like grip.

"Clever little trick, what?" he grinned at the surprised man. "Learned it from an almond-eye in Japan." Then, as the handcuffs clicked upon Judson's wrists, Bleeker emptied the automatic chamber and jokingly offered the bullets to Aline.

"Have one?" he asked her teasingly; "steel-nosed

pellets for stupid people . . . never fail to cure butting-in . . . if they're taken in time!"

"Judson, I'm really grieved!" Mrs. R.-S. said sincerely, "after all these years that you've been in my service!"

"That isn't the half of it!" Bleeker broke in with a moan, fearing to give the butler a chance to reply. "What on earth am I going to do for cocktails now!"

"Oh, Mummy!" Aline exclaimed, sensing Bleeker's desire to have Mrs. R.-S. leave them, "do go and tell Estelle . . . she'll be so relieved!"

"Of course, dear," her mother said as Stratini and the detective led Judson away. "I must take her the necklace at once, before anything happens to it."

"But you can't do that," Whitney broke in. "Let me give it to Stratti . . . the detective will probably wish it as evidence against Judson . . . besides, I want a word with this hawkshaw."

"Whitney, I wish you wouldn't," Carol said quickly, fearful of the result of such a discussion, but Bleeker caught her eye and slowly shook his head. For an instant Carol wavered, her fingers groping inside the bag and timorously touching the slip of paper which nestled safely there.

"There's nothing to be afraid of now," Bleeker whispered to her. "For the present keep mum . . . and *don't show that slip to anyone!*"

IX.

IN the spacious paneled library, a perfect replica of an ancient manor hall, Stratini looked like a feudal duke as he sat at the head of the massive center table of antique, carved black oak. With his monocle nicely adjusted beneath his shaggy gray brow, he scrutinized the prisoner with a look of inscrutable cunning.

Judson, with Brown at his elbow, was palpably nervous and apprehensive, now that his outburst of fury had subsided somewhat. Avoiding Stratini's relentless stare, he shuffled his feet awkwardly upon the thick, soft carpet, and the manacles on his wrists clinked as he clasped and unclasped his hands. Stratini selected a cigarette and lit it with thoughtful care; then he examined the empty gun in his hand. As he did so, the door opened and Whitney Duane came into the room with the air of a district attorney.

Seating himself in a high baronial chair, he placed Estelle's necklace in front of him on the table and turned to the impresario inquiringly. Stratini smiled as he picked it up and trickled the stones through his fingers. They sparkled in the subdued light which filtered through leaded panes . . . and he seemed to weigh them expertly . . . as though dubious of their worth . . . quite evidently appraising their intrinsic temptation.

"*Imbecile!*" he exclaimed at last, and gazed with contempt at Judson. "What made you risk your place and your liberty for a bauble of so little value?"

The detective stared at the jewels in amazement and Whitney's face took on a curious expression.

"They are *good*," Stratini grudged, with a connoisseur's indifference, "yet hardly worth the price

you will have to pay . . . certainly not fine enough to risk murder to obtain."

"I told you I didn't take them!" Judson cried out excitedly. "Mr. Bleeker knows how they got in that bag . . . but I didn't put them there. He's lying, Signor Stratini!"

"You mean," Stratini corrected, "that he's told but a part of the truth. That's what *you're* doing, Judson . . . and you're lying in the bargain. Aren't you rather foolish?"

"What's the use of my talking?" the man demanded belligerently. "You won't believe me . . . and nobody's going to help me prove what I say!"

"Why *should* anyone? Why should it be necessary . . . if you're prepared to make a confession?" Stratini asked quietly, flicking the ash from his cigarette.

"You wouldn't let me go on, out on the porch!" Judson accused. "When I tried to explain, Mr. Bleeker walloped me. . . ."

"Quite properly," said Stratini. "If he hadn't, you might be on your way to the electric chair . . . so it seems to me you owe him a debt of gratitude."

"Well, I'm not going to stand the blame alone!" Judson declared sullenly.

"Ah!" Stratini raised his eyebrows. "Now we shall get along better. Just *who*, if you please, ought to suffer with you?"

"You know as well as I do!" Judson flashed at him.

"Perhaps," nodded Stratini, "but it would be more clubby if you'd tell me. I should very much hate to make a mistake in the matter."

Judson sneered. "Oh, you won't make any mistake . . . because you want to protect her. . . ."

"Protect whom?" demanded Stratini, leaning forward on the table.

"You think you're clever, don't you?" Judson shot

at him. "Well, I know what I know . . . and I'll *tell* it . . . but not to you!"

"Suit yourself," said Stratini. "But just bear this in mind. Mr. Brown, at your elbow, is not of the police. He is here at the request of Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant. Unless we deem it necessary, the police may not be called . . . and whether or not they are, depends upon you."

"Does it?" growled the butler, jerking his handcuffs violently. "If you think you can buy my silence, you're mistaken. You can send me to jail if you like, but if you do I'll stir up a scandal you'll never hear the last of. . . ."

"Why waste time with the man, Stratti?" Whitney put in. "There's no question of his guilt and Bleeker's testimony will be quite sufficient to give him a jail sentence. . . ."

"You try to send me up and I'll peach on *her*!" Judson spat at him desperately. "You think you can get away with whatever you like, because you're a rich, crooked lawyer! Well, all your shyster tricks won't keep this singing woman out of the mess if I tell what I know about her!"

White with fury, Whitney sprang to his feet, fists clenched and his eyes blazing. Then, with a gesture of helplessness, his hands dropped to his sides. Obviously he could not strike the manacled man, and his impotence drove him frantic; but Stratini calmly intervened and came to the rescue.

"I don't see how you can help us, Whit, and I wish you and Brown would leave me alone with Judson," he said with a nod of dismissal toward the detective. "There is a little matter I should like to discuss in private with this estimable person."

"What are you going to do with me?" shrieked the suspicious man, drawing back from the piercing glance Stratini gave him.

"Oh, I'm not going to flay you alive, or torture you

physically," the impresario said. "In fact, Brown, you may release his hands. I'm only going to ask him a question or two . . . and he's going to tell me the truth."

"Very well, sir," Brown bowed and unlocked the handcuffs. "I'll be just outside when you want me."

Stratini nodded, and Judson, furtively watching the window, moved a trifle nearer the casement. Stratini made no move to stop him. Instead, he folded his hands behind his back and with bowed head walked to the empty fireplace. He heard the door close as Whitney and Brown went out, and then he smiled covertly, and peered round at Judson.

"You're playing a thankless game!" he ridiculed the butler. "With the charges that can be pressed, you'll serve at least twenty years. That's practically life at your age, Judson."

The butler did not answer. His gaze was intent upon the window.

"Do you find it warm in here?" Stratini asked smilingly, and Judson started guiltily. "It will be warmer for you, my man, if you attempt to warn whoever's listening there!"

"Listening?" stammered the butler. "I don't understand you, sir."

"Correct!" Stratini's teeth snapped. "You don't, or you wouldn't defy me. Judson, I'm not in the least concerned with what becomes of you, and the theft of Mrs. Delancey's necklace does not interest me in the least. Yet there is something you know about a certain lady which would interest me very much."

An evil glint came into the butler's eyes and he glanced toward the door apprehensively. "Suppose I *do* tell you?" he asked in a guarded tone.

"Let us rather suppose what will happen if you don't!" Stratini paused to light a fresh cigarette. "I am not so dense that I cannot see through your little game. A moment ago you mentioned Miss Drayton."

Slowly he exhaled a great lungful of pungent smoke. "Of course you read what our friend the Rector said, and you know what took place on the porch this morning. Naturally, you assume that your mistress is distressed by all this publicity . . . and you feel that she might be willing to take certain steps to avoid any further scandal."

Judson grinned. "You *look* like the devil himself!" he scanned Stratini's features. "I wonder if you *ain't* him!"

Stratini brushed back his hair and fingered his waxed mustache as he stared at his reflection in the polished shield of a stand of armor. "Hum!" he murmured. "The Mephisto resemblance *is* rather striking. . . . Perhaps the good Doctor Duane has observed it."

His apparent preoccupation threw Judson off his guard, and, underrating the impresario's cunning, he felt that he might still deceive his inquisitor. "I wanted to tell the truth, sir," he insisted earnestly, "only I thought you knew it, and wouldn't let me."

"How so?" Stratini wheeled on him.

"Well, sir," Judson went on, "this corporation business, and you and Mr. Bleeker and Mr. Whitney, all trying to hush up things about Miss Carol. . . ."

"Hush up what things?" Stratini demanded with narrowed eyes. "Just what do you think we're concealing?"

"What those two wouldn't let her tell the detective!" Judson told him. "I guess I was wrong, sir . . . but I thought you knew it, too . . . well, sir, if I may say so . . . because I believed what the Rector thinks about you and Miss Carol."

"Bah!" snapped Stratini. "Either you are a great ninny or an absurd rogue."

"I'm sorry, sir," the butler apologized, "but it seemed a bit strange, sir. . . ."

"That a man of my caliber might honestly wish

to help the girl?" Stratini said sarcastically. "You are a credit to the circle in which you serve, Judson. Thank God, you do not reflect the views of your mistress and Miss Aline . . . even though you have been absorbing the suspicions and opinions of their guests!"

Visibly startled by his remark, Judson dropped his eyes and Stratini took a quick step toward him. "Who's outside that window?" he asked with a smile.

"I—I don't know, sir. . . ."

"Shall we look and see," Stratini suggested, "or would you prefer to tell me just how you obtained this necklace and why you put it in Miss Drayton's workbag?"

"I *didn't* put it there!" Judson stoutly maintained, with an uneasy glance toward the casement.

"Keep your voice down!" Stratini ordered. "Then stop these deliberate misstatements. You *did* hide the jewels there, and you *didn't* take them from Mrs. Delancey because their value tempted you. Your whole scheme is nothing more nor less than blackmail. Now out with it, you fool, or instead of jailing you, I'll throttle you myself!"

He flexed his strong, heavy fingers slowly, and Judson recoiled as he realized the powerful strength of the man. "Well?" Judson pleaded, hoping for clemency. "Can you blame me, sir . . . when you consider what I know, and what I thought . . . ?"

"I'm not interested in your thoughts," Stratini stopped him with a gesture, "but I mean to find out what you have learned . . . or imagine is so."

"Then ask Miss Carol to show you her workbag . . . if she hasn't torn up what's in it?"

"Since you know, tell me yourself!" Stratini commanded.

For a moment, Judson hesitated, wondering whether the time had come to play his trump card, whether, in fact, his statement would prove news to Stratini. Then, in a confidential tone, he said, "*She's been in jail!*"

"Miss Drayton?" Stratini stroked his mustache. . . . "Just how do you know that?"

"Her certificate of discharge is in that bag . . . Mr. Bleeker knew it, and he knew that if you saw it, I'd be cleared of suspicion. . . ."

"Why?" asked Stratini dryly.

"Wouldn't her record stand against her?"

"Not necessarily," Stratini shook his head. Then as the butler stared at him in amazement, he added, "You've seen this paper?"

"Yes, sir," Judson told him. "In fact I found it. . . ." And he went on to relate the certificate's history. "So you see, sir," he concluded triumphantly, "Mr. Bleeker's mixed up with her somehow."

"Quite so," chuckled Stratini. "We all are."

"Not you, sir?" Judson exclaimed with a feeling of terror. "You ain't all crooks, are you?"

"Upon advice of counsel, I decline to reply," Stratini answered him laughingly. "I'm putting the questions, Judson, if it's all the same to you. But to get back to Miss Drayton . . . you say there's another name on this form?"

"Mary Drew," Judson answered glibly, "but of course, it's only an alias. . . ."

"Are you certain of that, Judson?" Stratini watched him narrowly.

"Why, reasonably, sir . . . since she owned that the discharge was hers."

"Of course," nodded Stratini, "I'd forgotten that for the moment."

"So you see, sir," the butler congratulated himself at the progress he was making, "I could have cleared myself right away if Mr. Bleeker'd let me tell you this before. . . ."

"I don't see how," Stratini declined to agree, "although you've done me a service in furnishing this bit of news." His satisfaction seemed too genuine to be feigned.

"I'd have told you before, sir," the butler pleaded virtuously. "Only . . ."

"Only it didn't suit your purpose to do so!" Stratini cut in. "You were waiting until you could safely cash-in on the information. In time, it might have proved valuable . . . when Miss Drayton is earning huge sums as an operatic star . . . eh?"

The butler lowered his eyes and seemed at a loss for an answer. Stratini had him cornered, but he did not mean to reveal his hand just yet. He had too much to lose.

"So far so good," the impresario clapped his hands and began to pace up and down. "Now let's see if we can't get to the bottom of this. . . . What made you change your mind?"

"What *made* me . . . ?" Judson faltered, sparring for time, seeking a noncommittal reply.

"Perhaps I should say *who*," Stratini amended his question. "I'm going to find out you know . . . just how much you were promised for putting this necklace in Miss Drayton's bag, and who it was that promised to pay it to you."

"Nobody promised to pay me anything!" the butler denied in confusion. "You can ask anybody. . . ."

"I am asking *you*!" Stratini reminded him. "And I'm going to ask you several other things. . . . For instance . . . why you've so much interest in all that goes on about you . . . and how it is that *Social Chat* learns so many . . . rather personal things?"

Judson turned ashen. "How should I know?" he faltered.

"It might be difficult to prove . . . and then again, it might not," Stratini opined. "Yet the little matter of its latest scandal is an interesting case in point."

"You can't blame me for *that*!" Judson sneered at him.

"Except for the actual passing on of the story?" Stratini suggested. "I can imagine that you were

not informed as to just what happened . . . yet it is curious that this canard is followed by our finding Mrs. Delancey's jewels in Miss Drayton's workbag . . . very curious!"

"So you're on, are you?" Judson growled sullenly. "All right, then . . . will you let me go if I spill the whole business?" With eyes like those of a caged animal, he looked quickly from the casement to Stratini and then back again to the leaded panes, against which the faint shadow of a woman's head was now clearly silhouetted.

The impresario laughed aloud. "Willingly, you bungler!" he scorned the cringing creature. "This woman has made a fool of you, with her bribes, and perhaps with promises that never will be fulfilled. . . ."

And striding toward the casement, he threw open the glass doors as Judson stood open-mouthed in astonished disillusionment. Then his jaw snapped and a sickly smile came over his features. "Didn't I tell you, sir?" he said with a note of triumph. . . .

Carol stood on the balcony, and she dropped her eyes in confusion as Stratini stared at her. For a moment he stood aghast, and raised his hand to make sure that his monocle was in place.

"Really, my dear," he said, after a moment's pause, "there are times when you make it difficult for one to have faith in you."

"I'm not asking you to have faith in me . . . any more," she said resignedly, looking over his shoulder at the gaping Judson. "I suppose he has told you about me. . . ."

"Judson?" Stratini arched his eyebrows and dropped his monocle. "Oh, yes . . . he has told me a number of things . . . more than he meant to, in fact . . . but where is Estelle?"

The butler stiffened and Carol turned her head,

as though looking for someone who should be on the lawn.

"She was here just a moment ago . . . when I came along," Carol said simply. "She was wondering whether you'd give her the necklace, or whether she'd have to testify against the man."

A snarl broke from the butler and Stratini laughed aloud. "You hear?" he shrugged, as he turned to the man. "Are you satisfied . . . or would you rather have Mrs. Delancey confirm that statement?"

"I'd like to ring her damn swan's neck!" Judson exclaimed in a rage.

"Suit yourself!" Stratini washed his hands of the other's course. "Far be it from me to deter you . . . but the path is clear at the moment . . . in case you care to be off . . . and hold your tongue!"

"About you and Miss Drayton?" Judson bargained quickly, stepping through the window as though he feared the detective's return.

"I have very little concern with the affairs of anyone else," Stratini said meaningly, "but I have a decided aversion to anyone's meddling with my own affairs."

In astonishment, Carol watched Judson scurry across the lawn, dart through the hedge and disappear down the public road.

"You're letting him go?" she asked, incomprehensibly.

"*Si!*" smiled Stratini. "Step in and I'll tell you about it. . . . It's time we had a frank chat."

X.

METICULOUSLY, Stratini closed and fastened the windows as Carol stepped into the library ahead of him.

"We will have no more eavesdroppers," he announced with grim assurance, and came toward the long table where Carol seated herself, drumming the polished wood with her finger-tips.

Indignant beneath the flush his remark brought to her already burning cheeks, she straightened in her chair. "Do you accuse me of trying to overhear?"

"No," he answered abruptly. "You *would* not . . . but if you had, you would not be so perturbed . . . even though little good of yourself would have come to your ears."

Then, as she watched him in uncomfortable silence, he moved methodically about the room, taking a candlestick from the mantle above the great fireplace and placing it beside the bronze writing set at her elbow. Then he sought a hammered tray and put it within easy reach, lit a cigarette from the burning taper, and faced her quizzically.

"Now," he proceeded, "we shall have our little *tête-à-tête*."

She sighed, wearily. "I have borne enough this morning . . . but this is the end! I will not be called to account for my every action . . . grilled as it suits your whim . . . doubted, insulted . . . made the catspaw in a game I loathe, even though I fail to understand its object!"

"Then it is high time you *did* understand!" he snapped impatiently. "Until you do . . . until you stop deceiving yourself . . . you cannot hope to succeed in what you propose to do. . . ."

"But I am not going on," she told him with decision. "I am sorry . . . if it hurts your vanity to have your experiment fail . . . but the statue declines to be molded."

"What arrant nonsense!" he exploded. "You may not stop if you would!"

"But I shall!" she defied him.

"And I say you *shall not!*" he countered with rising inflection. "You have assumed obligations and you will prove faithful to them . . . to the letter!"

"What makes you think so?" she tossed her head with sarcastic rebelliousness.

"The fact that you are a woman of principle," he answered, unanswerably. "With you, a bargain is a bargain."

"Go on!" she cried out in deep emotion, "remind me again that you have given your time and your money . . . that I am not even my own mistress. . . ."

"And that your only way out is to become someone's else. . . ."

"Stop it!" she screamed as she sprang to her feet, resting both hands on the table and leaning toward him with an insane flame in her eyes. "Once before you offered me that alternative. . . ."

"And you hurled a candlestick at my head!" he smiled suavely. "I recall the tendency . . . hence I put another where you could reach it easily."

"You love to torture your victims, don't you?" she sneered at him contemptuously.

"I *do* like to see them squirm," he admitted, blowing a cloud of smoke against the fire of his cigarette. "It is a sign of their vulnerability."

Her breasts swelled and her sensitive nostrils quivered, as her fingers twisted the cords of her bag into tangled knots.

"You see," he went on with maddening deliberateness, "our little Cinderella is caught by the heel . . .

and I find her charged with two rather serious crimes. . . .”

“By the butler you liberated!” she shot at him scornfully, and her heavy breathing grew faster. “Is *everyone’s* word to be taken in condemnation of me?”

“No,” he smiled irritatingly. “In fact, I am taking *no* one’s word concerning you. I do not even ask you to defend yourself . . . but I will not permit you to deny your guilt. I merely say that you have displeased me. Do not do it again!”

“In what way have I transgressed *this* time?” she asked ironically.

“First, by falling in love!” he frowned at her, “and then by deceiving me . . . two offenses I will not tolerate in any pupil!”

“If I have fallen in love,” she told him bitterly, “I have fallen out again. As for deceiving you . . . suppose I have?”

“Suppose you had *not*?” was his answer. “This muddle might have been avoided.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed dejectedly, “but then you would not have given me the chance that meant so much . . . that meant everything until . . .”

“You were foolish and spoiled it!” he nodded reprovingly. “Now listen to me . . . control yourself if you can, and consider matters calmly. I have always trusted you . . . yet not once have you trusted me. I have sounded the very depths of your soul . . . and I liked what I found there. I said to myself, here is a woman . . . of character, of talent, of great potentiality. She will make any sacrifice, endure any heartbreak, strive unceasingly and impersonally, for the great reward I offer her . . . and it seems that I was wrong.”

Carol hung her head. “I’m afraid I’m not strong enough for the battle,” she sighed, despondent.

“That is because you will not let me be your strength!” he accused, “because you conjure up ob-

stacles which I would willingly sweep from your path like so many cobwebs! Because you permit to grow great, in your silly, sentimental heart, fears at which I would laugh. Do you think because you have not told me, that I do not understand? In God's name, what sort of pariah *are* you that you seek to excommunicate yourself from our holy midst!"

She could not help but smile at his serious skepticism, and she became newly conscious of the kindness within the man. "Oh, you're right!" she agreed with him fully, "I've been absurdly foolish. . . ."

"But you're not any more, since you realize the fact!" he told her in triumph.

"I don't deserve your lenience!" she said regretfully, "but I'm not going to impose upon you any longer. I'm going to tell you everything . . . then you'll know why I can't go on."

"In that event, don't tell me!" he held up his hands in mock horror. "I might be terribly shocked . . . but you wouldn't be half so intriguing. To know a woman's secret is to destroy her greatest charm!"

"Your philosophy isn't fair to the others," she insisted, and thrusting her hand into her bag, she drew out the crumpled paper. "Read that." She passed it to him.

"To what end?" he inquired without glancing at it.

"Then Judson told you . . . you knew before, perhaps?"

"I surmised something worse. . . . I am disappointed again!"

"Worse?" she stared at him incredulously. "What *could* be worse? Do you know why I was arrested?"

"No. For stealing a little happiness?" he ventured. "It seldom pays, this timid filching . . . it is always better to take what we wish . . . openly . . . to be frank and honest, open and aboveboard . . . even in wrongdoing."

"But I didn't even *dream* of doing what they

claimed I'd done!" she appealed to him. "Stratti, you believe that, don't you!"

"How can I?" he shrugged, and she shrank back under his gaze. Then he smiled and said very gently, "You are unfair to yourself. You ask me to believe you innocent, yet you impose upon yourself the penalty of guilt. That is where you are culpable. The world has a great deal to give you . . . and you can give much to it . . . but neither you nor the world can be made any happier if you permit the ghosts of the past to bar your path to the future."

"That's a comfortable creed," she said with a sad little smile, "but suppose I should show that certificate . . . to Aline . . . ?"

"She'd expire with envy!" he chuckled. "Now let us be cheerful, my dear. I want you to come with me to a beautiful funeral."

As she saw what he meant to do, she put out her hand to stop him, but he only waved her away imperiously, with a solemn frown and a faint shake of his head. Then, as her breath came faster, he held the slip of paper into the candle flame. It curled in his fingers and crackled, grew brown and brittle, and crumbled, but he still held fast to one corner. Her heart was pounding against her breast as he gave a flick of his thumb and the last of the ashy residue fell on the beaten brass tray.

"*Voilà!*" he smiled at her. "This Mary Drew is dead. I, Stratini, have cremated her . . . and see, we blow peace to her ashes. . . . Pouf . . . Pouf! She is quite out of the world . . . she never existed in fact. Let us forget her."

"Oh, Stratti!" she cried, deeply moved. "If I only *could* forget her!"

"How can you remember someone who never was?" he gesticulated. "You are Carol Drayton, the friend of Baptiste Stratini! Who in ten thousand devils can say you are anyone else? What an absurd question.

We do not even deny foolish rumors . . . we dismiss them. . . . Bah!"

"But is such a pretense fair to Mrs. R.-S. . . , when she has taken me into her home, given me the protection of her position . . . only to be made the subjects of such slurs. . . ."

"As are cast by an inconsistent idiot!" Stratini exclaimed, pounding his fist on the table. "He tells us ever so sweetly, to return good for evil . . . and then proceeds to think evil of a girl who wants to be good!"

"He would be even more bitter if he knew what you just burned!" she shuddered.

"But it is burned!" Stratini reminded her. "Neither Mrs. R.-S. nor Aline knew this Mary Drew. She is nothing whatever to them. *You are Carol Drayton.* They love you, believe in you . . . hope for your success, with sincere devotion. Are you going to disappoint them? Hardly."

"I wish I *might* feel as you wish me to," she vainly groped for a way.

"Then you *do* feel as I do!" he cried with enthusiasm. "You have only to remember that you are your true self . . . that you have done nothing of which to be ashamed . . . and that no one can possibly make us care any less for you. The state of our affection depends upon you alone."

Slowly sinking into a chair, she buried her face in her hands, and for several moments the tick of the grandfather's clock was the only sound in the room. Stratini's face was a study as he stood by the mantel watching her with a tenderness which seldom showed in his expression. Then with a look of ecstasy on her features, she stood up and crossed to him with both arms outstretched, trustingly confident.

"Oh, Stratti!" she said intensely, as he took her hands in his, "I feel like a clean slate . . . with all the bad marks wiped off!"

"I am glad," he beamed. "Now suppose we begin to write something worth while there."

She nodded eagerly. "I think you'll find me an almost perfect pupil!" she promised, her gratitude transforming her and making her wholesomely lovely.

"I wonder!" he speculated, with banter in his eyes. "Just to make sure, we'll try the hardest lesson first."

"Oh, let's!" she agreed eagerly, like an impatient child, eager to earn a respected instructor's approval.

"It is the little matter of self-discipline," he announced, "the difficult art of stifling sentiment. . . ."

"But I've told you I've fallen out of love!" she interrupted; yet she could not meet the scoffing look in his eyes. She knew that he knew it was not true.

"If you had, there would be nothing hard in the task I'm setting you," he urged her toward the table. "I want you to write a letter to Whitney Duane. . . ."

"You mean I am not to *see* him again . . . that I am to let him think . . ." she began to beseech him, but he only smiled at her sadly.

"Did we not agree that it makes no difference what anyone may think?" he asked relentlessly. "You and I are going on together until we reach our goal. In the meantime, you will have no other love than your work . . . no other thoughts than your singing. Whatever it costs, you will pay the price of the freedom which comes with peace of mind. When you have sung on my stage for one season . . . then you may make yourself as unhappy as you like in any way that pleases you!"

"But I can hardly be happy now, and have any peace of mind, if I know that I am hurting someone who cares for me," she explained to him simply.

"You were going to do it anyhow," he scored with deliberate intent, "unless I understand you less than I think I do. You refused him, didn't you?"

She nodded. "I told him I *couldn't* marry him

. . . yet you have just said that my reasons were absurd!" she challenged.

"Granted!" Stratini nodded his head with a grimace. "Now give him an excuse that's sensible. Tell him that you won't marry him . . . because you *won't!*"

"Perhaps it *would* be best," she meditated aloud.

"Unquestionably . . . for both of you," he said with conviction. "And when you say you *won't* I want you to mean it . . . to wipe that slate as clean as the other one." He paused and pointed to the paper rack, with its rich, simple stationery, and screwing in his monocle, peered about for a pen. "You will write the letter?"

"I will try," she answered, and then buried her face in her arms, folded over the blotting pad.

"I shall see that you are not disturbed," Stratini told her feelingly. Then, with his hand on the knob, he paused to look back at her pityingly, yet with a subtle satisfaction, not unmixed with sympathy for the man he was causing to suffer quite as much as the girl.

Carol heard the door close softly, and mechanically her hand stretched out to open the inkwell. With paper before her, she stared at the sheet, almost too stunned to write, unable to bring herself to give this wrench to her heart. An hour ago, she had not considered herself worth the sacrifice Whitney would be obliged to make if she should accept him . . . now, she wondered whether anything in the world was worth the sacrifice *she* was about to make.

Certainly, ambition would not find the words she sought. Certainly no earthly reward could ever replace or compensate for the love she must renounce . . . yet she found painful consolation in the knowledge that she was doing it for Whitney's sake. Her phrasing must be cautious . . . not too cruel, yet firm . . . convincing. She must make him put her

permanently out of his life . . . make him a little glad that she was going . . . and no hint of regret must be found between the lines . . . no trace of a tear must be evident on the page. Stratini was right. . . . It *was* the hardest lesson . . . but she must master it.

Resonant chimes startled her and reluctantly she began to compose. At first her efforts were fruitless . . . she had even begun, *My own darling!* Then resolution conquered, and the fevered scratching of her pen drowned out the monotonous, mocking ticking of the great clock in the corner, measuring out its gradually healing potion of time.

BOOK THREE

I.

ALINE and Carol were swinging along the path by the wall of Riverside Drive, eagerly drinking in the tonic-like ozone. It was late October in New York . . . Gotham's most glorious season! Ever-hurrying throngs moved with renewed alertness, and glowing faces sparkled with the sheer joy of living. The tang in the air made the touch of furs seem pleasant, and the bus-tops reflected fall fashions, fresh from Fifth Avenue.

The sweeping stretches of winding way presented gorgeous vistas of golden-brown, with here and there a lingering touch of green . . . as though summer were loath to leave when all the world was so happy. Sunbeams danced on the countless window panes of tall apartment façades, and glinted in the choppy churn of the craft which skimmed the Hudson. An impertinent wind snapped out the ensign of a battleship at anchor, and blew the notes of a bugle clearly toward the shore. At its sound, a horse on the bridle path pricked up its ears, and its rider laughed as the morning's invigoration spurred the prancing stallion into a canter.

It was now past noon, and, having walked to the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, the girls' cheeks were cool and fresh from their exercise. The distance from Park Avenue had seemed but a trifling stretch, and neither of them was tired, yet Carol's wrist watch warned them of the need to ride. So Aline waved her vanity ease at a passing taxicab, and the two ran across the asphalt to enter it.

A policeman smiled after their nimble heels and ap-

proved the silken flash which emerged from beneath a pair of *chic* skirts to disappear into the cab. Then the machine shot northward, over the Ninety-sixth Street bridge and on toward Grant's Tomb. Peeping into her mirror, Aline painted the lily while Carol pensively played with the orchids pinned to her corsage . . . a mute message of worship from Whitney Duane that she could not refrain from wearing as he had begged her to do. Yet she knew that Baptiste Stratini would be angry if he knew.

But there were few scant moments for her to indulge in introspection as the busy taximeter ticked its speedy tune, and it seemed little more than an instant before the car took the curve which led into Claremont. On the topmost step of the glass-enclosed porch, Stratini was waiting for them, and now he hurried down to slip a bill to the chauffeur.

With a gallantry suggestive of courtlier climes, he handed the girls to the sidewalk, and his eyes were glittering pridefully as he followed them into the roadhouse where a Bonaparte once resided. An obsequious captain was waiting to guide them to a table around on the side where the view takes in the upper width of the swift-running river; and Stratini himself tucked Carol comfortably in her chair. He had already ordered luncheon, and, while the waiter was absent, he smilingly produced an orange-hued aid to their ravenous appetites.

Then as he blew little smoke rings at an antlered head on the wall, he related the latest tid-bits of operatic intrigue . . . how this and that petulant singer was curious as to his plans, and how he was teasing them all with his prophecies about Carol.

"And before many months, my dear," he smiled at Aline, "*our* Songbird will try out her wings . . . unless she should grow too impatient and force me to clip them!"

"No fear of that!" laughed Carol, "I've grown to

like my cage, and the perch where I sit and chirp at the snap of your fingers. I'll hardly know how to behave when you open the door . . . and maybe you'll find that I haven't yet learned to fly."

"It will be my place to determine that," he reminded her with a smile, "but do not sip your soup so daintily . . . a prima donna should attack food, like a fishwife!" Which reminded him of an incident which made them shake with merriment, and caused the waiter to hide his face as he grinned over Stratini's inimitable mimicry.

So with one yarn and another, Stratini kept them laughing, and all too soon the demi-tasse grew cold. Yet despite her delighted interest in all that Stratini was saying, Carol was not unconscious of the attention paid her by the motorists who were lunching at nearby tables. In a sense, she had become a Manhattan celebrity, and of course Stratini was recognized by practically all of their neighbors. Even Aline came in for her share of covert admiration, and a number of youths flushed guiltily as the *débutante* noticed the girls they were entertaining . . . girls almost as striking as Carol and Aline . . . stunningly dressed, but strikingly hard in their artificial beauty. One who sat at a table nearby had the face of a madonna, but her conversation condemned her and the gold-laced officer with her would have been court-martialed for telling such tales in the mess aboard his man-o'-war.

The brazenness of this butterfly rather amused Stratini; but a chance remark, overheard now and then, made even Aline shudder, for Judy O'Gradys and Colonels' Ladies are *not* alike under their skins, even though they sometimes change their views and positions, and now and then a colonel has cause to complain. To Carol, the girl's dainty loveliness was strikingly inconsistent with the cold calculation apparent in her eyes, and Carol tried to view herself

seated at such a table, if it had not been for the course which chance had opened to her. She could hardly conceive of herself cloaked in commediated finery, yet deep in her heart she understood the despair which leads to disgrace, although she could not comprehend the seeming indifference with which this scornful siren scoffed at convention.

It sickened her, turned her thoughts from pleasant things and rewards that were near at hand, and plunged her into the depths of despondent melancholy. Not even the thin veneer of outward virtue curtained this other girl's avarice, yet she was armor-proof against the shafts of public criticism. This was the image the Rector had had in mind when he spoke of Carol, and she wondered whether Whitney knew how different she was at heart . . . how far removed she was from this type in fact. She had made her letter to him a coldly selfish epistle, in the hope that he would share the disgust she felt for herself. If he believed her honest in what she expressed, his heart could hardly harbor her image longer, yet she had spared herself the biting ignomy of trying to paint her own picture with scarlet strokes.

She was glad of that now. It offered a little balm to the hurt which had not healed, and made easier to bear, her separation from him. At the moment, she was thinking of his sudden departure from Clifcleft—within an hour after receiving her missive. He had not even attempted to see her, wishing to spare the woman he loved the sight of his pain. She still had the little note he had left, and knew that she always would have; and even now she often slept with it under her pillow. He had accepted his *congé* with sportsmanlike courage, neither complaining nor daring to hope, and wishing her every success in her chosen vocation.

As she had watched from her window, Whitney climbed into the motor, bade farewell to Aline, and

was whisked away down the drive. Peering through the screen, it seemed as though she looked out from a cell . . . not the sordid one of which she had dreaded to tell him . . . but through the bars of a brighter cage, at the door of which Stratini stood . . . a kindly, determined jailer. Like a cut-back on the silver sheet, she seemed to see again, the dust of a departing car, and deep in her thoughts, she hardly heard what Stratini was saying.

But it was Aline who was talking now, voicing her scorn of married men who lunched with other ladies. Carol inferred that she knew the man in blue and gold who was smiling at the girl whose delicate hardness had moved her so deeply.

"Take my own Dad, for instance," Aline said to Stratini, "a more lovable, inconstant vagabond never philandered. . . . Perhaps he might have been different if he hadn't had too much money to stand having too little to do . . . you know what the devil's supposed to provide for those who are idle and itching. . . . Mother just heaved a sigh of relief when his heart burst from the strain . . . and all the cute little chorus girls wept and went into mourning."

"Yet you admit," Stratini observed, "that your father was lovable. That at least, is something to remember of a parent."

"Yes, it is!" Aline agreed, "and I was just crazy about him! But if I ever have any kids, I don't want them to think of their father in the way I think of mine . . . especially if they're girls, Stratti. I've met men like Dad, myself . . . since I've grown up more or less . . . and I'll say that they're rather rotten!"

Her earnestness impressed the remark on Carol's consciousness, and she thought of the way his children would be sure to think of Whitney . . . wondering in the same flash, what they would think of her . . . and whether, indeed, she had any right ever to become a mother.

Since her return to New York, Carol had resumed her routine with almost religious fervor, trying with fixedness of purpose to forget herself in her work. And partly, she had succeeded . . . succeeded to the extent where her singing showed great improvement. Of course the thing that she did not know was obvious to Stratini. The very repression she exercised, and the gnawing hunger within her, had lent a subtle something to her mellifluous tones . . . a quality of deep feeling which would otherwise have been lacking . . . a quality that her maestro meant to develop still further.

But while Whitney had absented himself from the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant home, he had not taken himself completely out of her life. Frequently, she found a note penned from his rooms or his clubs; friendly, encouraging messages, signed "your incorporator" . . . as pleasantly impersonal as they were delightful. Then, too, there were boxes from Thorleys and bonbons from Maillard's and Louis Sherry's . . . just with a scribbled card, hoping she'd wear or enjoy them. And she did, despite the depression they caused her.

Not once, however, did she relax her determination to fulfill her promise to Stratini. She had burned her bridges behind her and had not the slightest intention of building them up again. In time, she hoped she might forget in fact as well as in pretense, but even as she drew nearer her goal, the likelihood of stifling her love grew less and less. Outwardly, however, her secret would not have been guessed, and there were those who met her who thought her decidedly cold . . . cold as an iceberg, someone said, and deeper beneath the surface.

That Whitney failed to drop in now and then was never commented upon by Mrs. R.-S. or Aline. Tacitly, they accepted his unaccustomed absence, and Carol was certain they sensed the situation, even if Stratini

had not explained it to them. Even Gramercy Bleeker, who whimsically proclaimed himself her elder brother, never so much as mentioned Duane in her presence . . . and Bleeker was hanging about Aline in as much of her time as she'd give him.

"Now what shall we do this afternoon?" Stratini turned to Carol, and she suddenly tried to concentrate on the problem. Absently, her fingers toyed with the blooms at her waist, and the impresario covertly watched the play of her slender fingers. "Since this is a singing holiday, let us steer clear of music and think of something diverting."

Aline at once advanced a dozen suggestions, all of which led to a place where they might dance at tea time, but Stratini vetoed her every plan and waited for Carol's selection. These little week-end excursions had become a pleasant habit, and when she could spare the time, Mrs. R.-S. went with them, but to-day she had been detained by the Drama League or the Hallowe'en Fête, or women's suffrage or something.

"If I did not know better," Stratini smiled, as he waited for Carol's decision, "I should suspect that my Songbird has fallen in love again!"

Carol avoided his glance, but laughingly denied any such violation of her promise to behave herself and abide by the stringent rules of her own incorporation. Then, before she realized what Stratini was doing, he reached beneath the table cloth and caught at the ribbon bow about her bouquet.

"Now let us see if he's faithful!" he cried with pretended glee, and his heavily ringed fingers began to pick at the petals. "He loves me, he loves me not!" he tore off the beautiful blooms, "he loves me, he loves me . . . not . . . isn't it so?"

And carelessly dropping the flowers in front of Aline, he fixed his gaze upon Carol with gently chiding reproof, his disappointment so evident that she dared not resent his rudeness.

"I suppose you're right!" she said with an effort at lightness, "yet isn't a diva permitted to wear her admirers' tributes?"

"A diva, yes . . . a tyro, no!" Stratini ruled. "You will have to wait until you're beyond the three year limit, my child. Then if you like, you may sail your own bark on the uncharted seas of romance. Come, let us decide . . . what shall we do to-day?"

"Let's go down to the Battery and take a peep at the fish!" Aline put in as she tilted the tip of her nose, "or perhaps you two have never been to the Spanish Museum. Then, of course, there's the peanut man, just outside the Zoo . . . for a nickel he'll sell us enough to feed all the nuts in the park!"

"Your inference is impudent!" Stratini assumed a stern air. "If you don't behave yourself properly we'll go see a moving picture."

"Oh, save me, kind sir!" Aline cried out with melodramatic intensity, just at a moment when the other diners were silent, and grins and amused titters greeted her clearly heard outburst. Carol flushed with amusement, as chairs were pushed back and necks were craned to catch a glimpse of the maiden so loudly calling for help; and Stratini burst into a bellow of mirth that made the windowpanes rattle. An elderly lady leveled her lorgnon at him and remarked that it was disgraceful to see a man of his age cutting up with two children who ought to be soundly spanked!

Then before their hilarity had fully subsided, the clank of spurs and the tread of boots came around the side of the building. Carol looked up as two horsemen approached, and her face turned crimson, for she found herself staring directly at Whitney Duane. Cap and crop tucked under his arm, he was lighting a cigarette, but he paused and the match flared out in his fingers. Beside him was Schuyler Tremaine, and naturally, they paused for a word of greeting.

Stratini explained the incident which had prompted

their mirth, and Tremaine incensed the old lady by smiling in spite of himself, when she caught him looking at her. But Carol was only conscious of the ruined bunch of orchids, and was all too well aware of the hurt which came into Whitney's eyes, although he tried to conceal it and spoke to her casually.

"We've been riding all morning," he said, "and only stopped for a bite of belated luncheon . . . but it's fine to see you again. . . . I hear you're progressing famously."

"So Stratti says," she faltered, and she thought that Whitney frowned . . . the knowledge of which was certain in the impresario's mind. So telling the waiter to call his car, he pushed back his chair and arose; and Carol, with a chastened air, followed his example.

But she would not go without trying, at least, to make Whitney understand, that she had worn his orchids because he wished that she would. "Aline," she said, as she picked up her gloves and adjusted her fur, "Stratti's almost ruined my flowers with his great paws, but I wish you'd reach them for me, if you will. . . ."

"Let me!" Whitney stooped as they fell to the floor, and the glance he gave Carol was grateful. She felt that he realized it was not her fault that the cloth was littered with petals, and sweeping a pile of them into her palm she pressed them against her cheek.

"Flowers, my dear," Stratini observed, in a meaning, cynical tone, "are like the loves of my singers . . . intoxicating to-night, in all of their passionate fragrance . . . but dead and forgotten by morning . . . and left for the maid to throw out!"

Whitney's expression changed, and his grip on his crop tightened, but he managed to master a smile as he shrugged his shoulders. Then instead of handing the torn blooms to Carol, he tossed them upon the table with a gesture of unimportance. Carol could have cried out as she penetrated the mask he chose to

assume, but she was also conscious of her maestro's deep displeasure. And perhaps Duane sensed something he had not dared to hope for, and came to Carol's rescue in the most casual way.

"May I 'phone you some day?" he asked with conventional courtesy, which somehow did not quite ring true, "perhaps we might ride together . . . if you're not kept too busy."

She wanted to tell him to call her up the first thing the following morning, yet she realized that even the slightest sign from her might undo all she had done, and she slowly shook her head.

"You forget that I'm married . . . married to my art," she replied with a laugh, as forced as it sounded flat, "and art, you know, is a terribly jealous husband. . . ."

"Art's usually termed a mistress!" Stratini cut in with a chuckle, "but this afternoon, my dear Songbird, your maestro claims your time."

II.

ON the Sabbath morning the cheery chimes of St. Timothy's Church rang out on the crisp sparkling air with benign invitation; yet their silvery tones sounded a knell in the heart of Doctor Duane. Their clear call did not summon Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant to her accustomed pew, and their echo did not find her motor parked by the curb before the imposing edifice in upper Fifth Avenue.

Whatever his personal feelings at finding himself banished from the matron's good graces, the Rector flatly refused an apology for his flaying. In fact, he had girded his loins and entered the fight in earnest, yet the war he waged was one of words at which social circles smiled. Cleverly capitalizing the absence of certain eminent members of his congregation, the clergyman made his church the mecca of newspaper men. They besieged the door of his study and crowded close to his chancel, ears attuned to note his every sensational sentence. In fairness to the divine it must be said that reporters only took down the more violent phrases of his preachments, and their pages gave prominence to his most scathing statements, ignoring his softer passages and the weekly, public travail of his poor, shocked soul. Yet, of course, the experienced Rector knew they would do just that. So he fished in his inkwell for sentences more striking in their construction than was warranted by conditions or truly Christian compassion.

The rest of New York chuckled and flocked to his fold, forsaking more mild mannered pastors and secular Sunday diversions. On Mondays, devout Jews, who thronged his sidewalk while sunning themselves at noon, spoke with contempt of a *Rav* whose teachings only

resulted in the wickedness and waywardness of those who walked in high places. So, in the depths of his despair, Doctor Duane found himself the sensation of the hour, the horror of his Bishop, and the laughing stock of those he sought to reprove.

"Sex, sin and the stench of society's shame . . . sensual dances, shocking divorces, and the naked, smirking harlots of a decadent stage" . . . all horrified the preacher and helped him attain the limelight. Specific indictment was lacking, for the Rector had learned the danger of treading on tender toes while flailing about the footstools of the mighty. Besides, if he mentioned names, the papers would not print what he said, for the syndicates frowned upon stories which might mean libel suits. So the clergyman conjured up visions of vice which would have been suppressed if shown before the footlights or published in fiction form. And because the public was eager for salacious mis-information, Doctor Duane's sermons were devoured and later discussed with a frankness that would have been taboo but for the fact that the Rector might be quoted.

Sitting in the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant library after a rather late breakfast, Carol was looking through the sheafs of newsprint and rotagravure, from which the minister gathered many a valuable text. But the musical notes held scant interest and the social chat none at all, so Carol was almost despairing of ridding herself of her thoughts when Judson's successor entered with a long, beribboned box.

With an effort to seem unconcerned, Carol signed to the man to place it on the table, where she feigned to ignore it; but of course she knew that the flowers were from Whitney. That would mean that he was not angry, that the incident of the orchids must have been understood, and Carol blamed herself for the note of joy in her heart. To yield to herself like this would be a violation of her promise, yet she could not help but wonder what Whitney was doing just then, riding or

golfing, or maybe at church, if he was not at his club, thinking of her and damning his reverend relative. Perhaps a note in the box would give her a hint, yet because she feared the reaction that would be certain to follow, she would not permit herself to untie the bow and see.

Then a tall figure in a well-cut morning coat came through the door, and Bleeker grinned at her. "Hello!" he said, and dropped himself loosely into a chair. "Just saw Mrs. R.-S. on her way to St. John's, and she almost tempted me to run up and hear the Bishop. Great old boy, Rhinebeck . . . and I understand he's stepped on Duane for denouncing '*The Unscorned Woman*' . . . says the show'd have closed on its first night if the dominie hadn't boosted it with his claim that it's plain licentious."

"Is it?" Carol asked. "You've seen it of course?"

"Naturally, but as a guide to the theater, I'm through with the Rector forever!" Bleeker announced in disgust. "How such drivel ever got by an intelligent producer's beyond me. Even the cast can't save it, but no doubt it'll run all season, thanks to the saintly Duane. He ought to have a commission on the author's royalty checks!"

"But is there any excuse for such things . . . for such plays, I mean?" Carol wondered aloud, "when there's so much that's good and beautiful, and equally dramatic, for the playwright to select . . . ?"

Bleeker grinned. "The Rector seems to have taken a leaf from the writing-men's book. . . . Instead of sticking to his last and urging us to wear shoes that are good, the old fox proceeds to pan us for walking in slippers of sin on the banks of the primrose path . . . and he finds that such stuff packs the church. If the crowd will go to St. Timothy's to learn how rotten things are, one can't be surprised if a putrid play draws a mob to the theater. Anyway, both the box

office and the contribution box seem to prove that it pays."

"But, Gram," Carol said with a little shudder, "it's horrible to think of making the Church commercial!"

"It's rather rotten to think of any influence for good being brought about by the root of all evil, yet the theatrical managers are no more subservient to popular taste than the Rector is. If the playwright holds a clergyman up to scorn, the goody-goodies gasp and hold up their hands in holy horror; but Duane deliberately fills his pews by stealing the theater's lure. Those who go to hear him, listen for lewdness and not for religion, and because he knows it, he makes it a point to feed sensation to them."

"Surely though," Carol objected, "we need someone to warn us of what we should not do?"

"Why?" asked Bleeker. "I'm not very religious, as perhaps you've noticed, but I've heard it said by some folks I admire, that evil doesn't exist. If that's so, what the devil's the sense of eternally calling our attention to it, or at least, to the fancied follies we'd be better off to forget?"

"Still," she reminded him, "you must give him credit for being in earnest."

"That's the hell of it!" Bleeker exclaimed. "His seriousness of purpose makes it all the more terrible. The theatrical manager frankly panders to the public purse and usually doesn't pretend to be altruistic; but Duane does . . . and his methods are a constant thorn in the flesh of the Bishop."

"He's coming to dinner this evening. . . ."

"Rhinebeck?" Bleeker smiled. "In that event, I think I'll stick around. It's a treat to be with that man . . . a sort of mental cocktail . . . and he knows just how to mix the spiritual stimulant I need . . . never try one in fact, that I'm not keen for another."

"I've never met him," Carol said pensively, "and I'm rather curious as to what he'll think of me. . . ."

"That's a funny thing about Bishop Rhinebeck," Bleeker told her, "it doesn't seem to matter what he thinks about us . . . it's what he somehow makes us think of ourselves. I believe if the Bishop petted it for a moment or two, an outcast alley-cat would try to win the blue ribbon at a blooded pussy-show."

"Then there may be a chance for me!" Carol managed to laugh, but her expression was all too serious not to be noted by Bleeker.

"By the way," he said, "I hope you never bother your head about that certificate thing. . . ."

"I've wondered why you never mentioned it," she said with a sudden start, as she faced him tensely, "and I've never had the chance to thank you for all you've done for me. . . ."

"Tush and piffle!" he mocked her seriousness. "I don't know what it was all about, and it makes no never-minds, but I hope you didn't suppose I meant to let our friend Estelle really put anything over?"

"Estelle?" Carol looked at him sharply. "Oh, I know what Stratti thinks about the jewels, and he's hinted that she sent some items to *Social Chat*, but Estelle had nothing to do with the paper you helped me to hide. . . ."

"It wasn't her fault if she didn't," Bleeker assured her, "and if the lovely lady doesn't watch her step she's going to come a cropper long before she's forty . . . the footprints of time are plain on the sands, or whatever the saying is. . . . Estelle's getting older without growing any wiser . . . and that's rather bad business usually."

"I'd be sorry to see her thoughtlessness bring her trouble," Carol said sincerely. "And because of certain things I know, I can understand and forgive what she tried to do to me. You can't imagine, Gramercy,

what a certain type of suffering . . . what the fear of one sort of exposure . . . can make a woman do."

"No?" smiled Bleeker. "Well, anyway, 'Stelle's all wrong. She and the Rector are working for different ends it's true, but their systems are too much alike. If you've noticed, neither she nor Duane have been here since that business at Clifcleft."

Carol nodded. "And I can't help feeling that I'm to blame, although Stratti says I mustn't. . . . I showed him that certificate, you know."

"I didn't, but I'm glad you were sensible enough to do it," Bleeker approved. "Your secret will be safer with him than if you'd kept it yourself . . . by that I mean, he'll make sure you don't trouble yourself about it. You know as well as I do, that things like that seem worse when we shut 'em up inside ourselves and brood about 'em alone."

"Gramercy," she began gratefully, "you've been perfectly splendid . . . !"

"Oh, no," he laughed, "I've merely proved to you that I'm quite a conscienceless creature, which, no doubt, is the reason I haven't a care in the world. Don't believe in cares . . . won't have anything to do with 'em . . . and when they will crop up, why I go out and drown 'em."

"But that's against the law!" she twitted him, and he grinned at her sheepishly.

"Sure it is," he admitted, defending himself. "Worry *ought* to be, but it's about the only thing left that we *can* do . . . legally. If you don't believe me, ask Whitney, he's learned in legal lore. . . ." But he broke off quickly, embarrassed at the slip he had made. "Forgive me," he apologized, "I didn't mean to mention him, and I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Carol told him, "and I'm sorry I've had to treat Whitney so, but really, Gram, it's best. . . ."

"Whit's a decent sort," he said, evasively yet meaningly, "but I don't want to butt in. . . ." And then

he fell silent, although he gazed at the unopened box on the table."

Carol flushed as she read his mind, and reproached herself for her needless discourtesy, yet she steeled herself against the desire to look at the blooms, to peer inside and learn whether or not Whitney had given some cryptic meaning to a brief note on his card. Yet she felt that to do so in Bleeker's presence would be the height of folly, for she probably would not be able to mask her emotion, and that would never do. So she sat quite still for a moment, tapping the rug with her heel, and then, as a sort of safeguard, she came to a quick decision.

"Gram," she said very slowly, "I want you to do something for me . . . something really vital . . . that I can't quite do myself."

"Why of course," he answered willingly, and waited for her to go on, but for a little while she hesitated to speak.

"It's about Whitney," she found the courage at last, although her reluctance was plain in her confusion. "I've done my best . . . or my worst," she made an effort to smile, "to make him forget about me without hurting him deeply. But it doesn't seem to be any use, because he's so fine and big that he simply won't get over being sorry for me . . . but I wish we could just be friends . . . that he'd go on liking me . . . and marry some other girl. If he *would* do that, I could be supremely happy. . . ."

"Could you?" Bleeker put in, with feigned surprise and fully evident doubt.

"Yes," Carol forced herself to utter the word with conviction. "Won't you tell him, Gramercy, in the way another man can, that it's perfectly, foolishly hopeless for him to go on with the thought that I may change . . . tell him, frankly, please do, just how hopeless it is!"

"Sure I'll do that," he said quizzically, "I'll make it a *point* to tell him . . . just how hopeless it is."

But if Carol caught his inflection, she had no time to protest, for as he was speaking, Aline came breezily into the room, a perfect Paquin picture dressed for a promenade.

"Have you two been petting each other?" she challenged, as she noticed Carol's embarrassment and the grin on Bleeker's face. "I know you have, and I'm horrified. . . ."

"If it didn't take you two hours to dress, I wouldn't steal your beaux!" Carol retorted smilingly as she recovered herself, and Bleeker nodded his head in approving confirmation.

"Promptness is a virtue that vampires should cultivate," he shook his finger at her, "but you surely don't suppose I'm going out for a walk with you dressed in such a costume?"

"No?" the penciled eyebrows arched, "is it too old or too young, too gay or too somber . . . or too what?"

"Too tempting, my dear!" he assured her. "To see you like that makes me want to sit on the sofa all day . . . why should we waste time in walking . . . !"

"Idiot!" she stamped her tiny pump. "Get your bonnet and crutch and come on! Every man who sees you with me will promptly pay up what he owes you."

"You fail to comprehend the seriousness of the situation!" he sighed with a wink at Carol. "Your *tout ensemble* will make folks imagine I'm airing a model from Lucille's, and my spotless reputation will be ruined . . . *utterly ruined*, my dear!"

"Carol must have stolen your brains! . . . Give me a cigarette!" she made a move at him, and as she lit it, murmured, "I hope your program has more pep than the ones Stratti provides!"

"I thought we might feed the swans by the lake or watch the sheep graze in the meadow," he suggested

tormentingly. "There *can't* be any harm in that, since Carol will chaperone us."

"Oh, no she won't!" Carol smiled, and leaned back luxuriously. "This is the day I'm going to rest from my arduous labors, and incidentally, improve my mind with a little belated study."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Aline caught her hand in an effort to pull her to her feet. "If you don't come out and get the air, I'll tell Stratti on you! Besides, you certainly don't expect me to walk alone with this impossible person, do you? He'd bore me to death before we get to the corner!"

"Aline, I mustn't!" Carol begged, wishing to be alone, and also subtly sensing the fact that Bleeker, despite his teasing, was eager for a *tête-à-tête* with the girl whose frock only made her fascination the greater. "I've several songs to learn, and Stratti will be very angry if he finds out how I've been neglecting my work."

With flashing eyes and the faintest sign of a flush, Aline turned upon Bleeker, and he raised his arms as though to protect himself from assault. "Goose!" she branded him brutally, "haven't you told her yet?"

"We've been chatting of more important things," Bleeker explained incorrigibly, and Aline flung a sofa cushion squarely at his head.

"Well, she might as well know the worst!" she announced with a sigh. "Condole with me, Carol," she begged, "I've promised to marry this man!"

"How perfectly splendid!" Carol cried, springing up eagerly, and throwing her arms about the bride-to-be.

"How perfectly *stupid*!" Aline sniffed. "Bye-bye to liberty and the pursuit of happiness! Last night, in a moment of mental aberration, I let him persuade me I loved him. Now can you imagine *me* so absolutely silly? But the most terrible part of it is that I meant it! Now, hardly twelve hours after I've said yes, he forgets to bring me flowers and has the utterly absurd

idea that he wants to sit on a sofa and spoon with his own fiancée!"

Guiltily, Carol turned to the box on the table, and before Bleeker could protest the negligence charged, Aline was tugging at its ribbon, quite innocently believing that he had brought the flowers with the intention of giving them to her in person.

"Listen, dear," he found his voice, with a gesture of apology as he helplessly turned to Carol, "I didn't bring those . . . really. . . ."

"Oh, rot!" snapped Aline. "I suppose you want me to think the fairies brought them!" And without so much as a glance at the card, she lifted a dozen roses from their bed of tissue and ferns.

But Bleeker stooped to the rug and recovered the little envelope, on which Carol's name was written. "I'm sorry," he said with real regret, as he passed it to her, and Aline suddenly realized what a mistake she had made.

"I'm sorry too!" she added genuinely, "but it's all Gramercy's fault, and you won't really mind will you dear?"

"Of course not," Carol said, but there was a catch in her voice, and the envelope fluttered to the floor as she stared at the card itself. The roses were from Stratini, and in his odd European hand he had scrawlingly written, "For a painstaking pupil from an approving maestro."

The shock of the message, with all it implied, stunned her for a moment, and instantly Aline sought to relieve the embarrassment of a trying situation.

"Why the old brute!" she pretended to fly into a rage. "Yesterday afternoon, he promised to buy us both a bouquet . . . and then forgot all about it . . . just like Gramercy here. So you'll have to divide with me when we go out. That'll teach Gram a lesson, and tell everyone we meet that you've no more use for Stratti than I have!"

As delicately as she stressed the word *everybody*, Carol was instantly grateful for Aline's thoughtful suggestion, and taking the roses from her, she began to separate the stems into two equal piles.

"What's more," Aline went on, as though irrepressibly, but with designing intent to put Carol at ease, "If we meet anyone on the way, you must promise not to desert us. I simply *won't* be alone with Gram this afternoon!"

"You're a darling!" Carol whispered as she embraced her again. "Only *you* could have thought to say that; and Aline, dear, I'm *so* glad that you're going to marry Gram!"

Bleeker shoved his hands in his trousers pockets and began to pace up and down, pretending to be perplexed in this double presence. "How *hap-py* a fel-*low* might be, with *ei-ther* fair char-*mer a-way*!" he broke into an atrocious falsetto, then laughingly dodged the slap Aline aimed for his ear. But she waved him a kiss in token of thanks for his support, and fondly caressed him with a look from the depths of her eyes. Yet there was a trace of a tear of sympathy in them as she turned to urge Carol to hurry and fetch her wraps.

"And don't stop to primp!" she ordered in desperation. "I'm positively afraid to be left with this moon-struck man."

"Oh, the moonshine's right in the old bootlegger's home!" Bleeker began to crone, and his ridiculous croaking broke the tension at once.

"All right, you two!" Carol agreed. "I'll be ready in just three minutes!" And hiding her emotion with eagerness to be off, she hurried out of the room.

"Damn shame!" Bleeker said in a low tone, as Carol disappeared along the hall.

"I wouldn't have had it happen for worlds!" Aline told him contritely, "for of course she thought . . . well you know! And some day, dear, I'm hoping that *they'll* be happy."

"Are *you?*" he asked as he caught her close and pressed her face against his.

"Yes, darn you!" she laughed up at him, "you know perfectly well I am . . . and that's what makes me hate you! I hadn't the slightest intention of getting engaged so soon . . . that is, *really* engaged, you know . . . love-you-till-I'm-a-red-hot-cinder stuff, and all that!"

"Sweet little devil!" he cuddled her, "long may you burn!"

"Be my big strong stoker, and I'll be your lump of coal!" she peered over his lapel with mischief in her eyes.

"More precious than diamonds is my love, now that the strike is on!" he hummed a simple tune as he whirled her about the room, and they generally acted like idiots until Carol came and caught them.

III.

WHITNEY DUANE stood in a window of the Lotus Club, looking out at the busses in Fifty-seventh Street. Arising late, he had breakfasted and gone for a walk to be alone with his thoughts. Now, as he meditatively puffed at his pipe, he had no craving for luncheon, but he did feel a gnawing need for diversion. Yet he could not make up his mind how to spend the afternoon. Pedestrians headed for Carnegie Hall suggested a symphony concert, but the soloist was a singer and music would only recall the ache he wished to forget.

Gramercy Bleeker had phoned earlier in the day, and Whitney felt strangely contented at the news concerning Aline. Their marriage was bound to be happy despite their restless, excitement-craving natures, and Whitney smiled to think of the two settled in their own home. Playmate and companion to both of them since childhood, he was as eager for their welfare as for his own, yet knowledge of their engagement left him incredibly lonely, a sensation which would grow stronger when the ceremony was over and he should still be single.

By this time, Gramercy would be at the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant apartment, and Whitney's natural impulse was to hasten there himself. What more natural than for him to be first to felicitate the charming bride-to-be? Yet because of Carol's presence in the familiar household, he felt its hospitable doors barred to him. Crowding upon the joy of their night on the sands at Clifcleft, Carol's note of dismissal had wounded him so unexpectedly that it left him in a daze. Whitney's hurried departure had been characteristic. His fine nature forbade an appeal from Carol's decision, yet in

weeks of solitude he had not been able to frame an intelligent course of action.

Ordinarily, pride would have caused him to shroud his sorrow with an air of nonchalance, for dissipation and senseless flirtation were both repugnant to him. Then, too, he had not forgotten his resolution to practice law with added earnestness, and already his senior partners were delighted with his zeal. But delving into lawbooks and daily pleading in court did not compensate for the lack of the thrills of polo, nor did occasional canters and turns on the links serve to ease his mind.

The previous day's encounter had upset his efforts at calm resignation completely, and a sleepless night had made him feel like an outcast hermit. The thing was unbearable, intolerable . . . unfair! His momentary glimpse of Carol's emotion as he had stooped to recover her ravished orchids, confirmed his belief that his congé did not come from the depths of her heart. Without the slightest suspicion or jealous reaction, he recognized Stratini as the instrument responsible for her attitude . . . to a degree at least. However, he did not fail to take into account the hurt which his uncle's utterances must have caused the girl. Despite his persistent efforts to convince himself that he was in no way to blame, he knew that he was undoubtedly the unintentional cause of the newspaper articles, and no one regretted them more.

Never having met Carol personally, Doctor Duane could know nothing against the girl except idle gossip . . . those silly stories related by women like Estelle Delancey and her irresponsible, reprehensible coterie. Normally, the Rector's regard for Mrs. R.-S. would have counseled caution, yet his fallacious horror of everything theatric had undoubtedly made him resent the likelihood of Carol's becoming his niece. Now, to add to his ill temper, Whitney found himself twitted in all his clubs each time his uncle broke into print in

flaring headlines. And these times were becoming more frequent. That he never referred to Carol or to Strattini did not tend to mitigate the sting of his constant slurs. That Mrs. R.-S. herself had broken with Dr. Duane did not seem to deter this man whose head had been turned by the wine of public attention. In his unreasoning zeal, the Rector failed to see that his Bishop and his parishioners, as well as most newspaper readers, took what he said with a grain of salt and questioned his sincerity if they did not doubt his sanity. But Mrs. R.-S. had not as yet preferred any charges.

His own difference with the Rector had pained Whitney deeply, not only because of its resulting break with Carol, but because he had always been more than fond of the clergyman. Taught to revere the older man since his earliest recollection, and proud of the churchly position his relative occupied, it was not pleasant for Whitney to see his idol crumble and make himself a spectacle in the eyes of thoughtful people. No doubt the world *did* need gentle counsel and level-headed foresight, but Whitney could not believe that its burdens would be lightened by carping criticism and constant impatient nagging. Certainly, the Rector's arraignment of his friends, and their fads and fancies, did not tend to make Whitney contented. On the contrary, he grew restive as the days dragged on . . . more out of patience with himself for tamely submitting to a situation which was galling enough in itself without having his uncle's sermons rub salt into open wounds.

So, with sudden determination, he swung about on his heel, resolved to face the Rector and plainly speak his mind. His conclusion to visit the dignified old mansion in quiet Waverly Place had not been easy to reach. Resentment was deep in his heart, and since he could not go humbly, it went against his grain to seek such an interview. He loathed scenes, and he knew that one was inevitable once he broached the subject.

Respect for his uncle forbade giving way to his temper, and even under the stress of unusual provocation, Whitney's manner was mild, in spite of a dignified firmness. Then, too, since he was no longer the Rector's heir, those who might learn of his going would probably think his purpose purely pecuniary. Sensible as he was to the uses of wealth, Whitney's soul revolted at being accused of mercenary intentions in endeavoring to resume recently severed relations.

For purely financial reasons, he really would have preferred to maintain their estrangement indefinitely . . . at least, until his personal efforts had somewhat recouped his fortunes and made him independent. But his own desires must be put aside, if only for Carol's sake, and his heart was hungry for her as he took his hat from the check-room boy and nodded in passing the doorman. If he could possibly persuade the Rector to cease his ranting, he felt that his sacrifice of pride would be well worth while. Carol and Mrs. R.-S. would understand his impulse, and he himself would feel relieved when he had unburdened his mind.

If his visit caused any comment, he meant to speak straight from the shoulder, and definitely align himself against the clergyman, yet he fondly hoped that some turn of affairs would occur to avert such a rupture.

Swinging across the sidewalk, he caught the rail of a passing bus and climbed the curving steps, eager to finish his pipe and think as he rode. Yet he could not help smiling as he thought that recent habit ruled in making him forswear a taxicab at the curb. He had practiced little economies since the Rector had cut him off, and it had been really surprising how little he needed to spend. Not that he had denied himself modest accustomed luxuries, but merely that he had avoided expenses which were not essential. That was well enough so long as he had no one but himself to consider, but if he meant to marry, such penury would not do. Before the winter was over, Carol would no

doubt be earning more in a single night than he could make in a month. In seasons which would follow, her income would steadily mount, and, as an operatic star, she would be bound to live on a scale he could not hope to afford. To accept *her* money was naturally not to be thought of, although he knew a score of men of his own position who did not hesitate to squander their wives' fortunes on whims of their own, and on women of whom their wives did not approve.

So he felt a supreme disgust with the world as he knew it, totally unconscious that several men on the bus had observed him with envy as he came out of his club. Even though they did not know just who Whitney might be, an indefinable something marked him as one of the favored few whose forefathers or fortunes give them the entrée to Manhattan's innermost circle.

In fact, Whitney found himself wishing that Carol was lacking in talent and that he had been born in more humble circumstances . . . at least, that their present positions would have permitted him to hasten to her with nothing more in his hand than his heart. But as the bus sped southward on lower Fifth Avenue, he steeled himself for the ordeal he knew was coming; even dared to hope that his errand might prove successful. It was almost absurd to dwell upon such a dénouement, and somehow the tall, silent buildings and almost deserted sidewalks depressed him with their Sabbath calm, yet the very sense of achievement which the great office structures suggested gave him courage and confidence in the fight he meant to wage.

Then, swinging down from the top of the coach, he crossed the street to the east, and made his way to the district where only a few remain who recall its departed glory, and dwell in the past behind fronts of crumbling magnificence. Ascending the brown-stone steps with a dignity demanded by the hauteur of the house, Whitney rang the bell and smiled as old Harper, the Rector's man, bowed him through the door.

"Is my uncle at home?" he inquired, as he put his hat and stick on the old-style hall-rack, observing that Harper had aged since he had been there last.

"I think the Rector is in his study, sir," Harper ventured doubtfully. "Is he expecting you, Mr. Whitney, or shall I say that you're here?"

"I think that would be best, perhaps," Whitney nodded, and passed on into the parlor, as heavily hideous as in the days when the Rector's mother had wielded the social scepter and held her famous soirées in this funereal room. "No wonder the old boy's gloomy!" Whitney thought, "it seems almost sinful to breathe in such an atmosphere!" And somehow a wave of pity came into his mind as he thought how lonely the man must be in the narrowness of his life . . . how limited his sympathy was with the ways of a new generation. Yet a clergyman's business is to learn and attempt to understand the motives which prompt his parishioners to hold the views they do, and Whitney found himself aware that his uncle had failed in this duty.

Yet as Harper returned to announce him, he could not help but smile at the ritualistic ceremony with which the Rector elected to surround himself. Old Harper might have been some monk, conducting the caller to an abbot's cell, and his manner made Whitney feel like a sinner *en route* to confession. What was once the library of the Duanes had been transformed to resemble a crypt of monastic impressiveness. Simplicity was its keynote, but its coldly correct architecture lacked the mellow richness of the churchly chambers after which it was patterned, just as its occupant's air struck Whitney as artificial.

The Rector had risen from a stately high-backed chair, on which his coat of arms was illumined, and as he stood by the antique table, with its exquisite carving, the sunlight from a high, narrow window bathed him in a soft ecclesiastical radiance. Impressive as the

effect was intended to be, Whitney could not help believing that it *was* intentional. Doctor Duane had planned those tinted panes so that a sort of halo would glow about his head. The shaft of light illumined his studied pose just as the calcium silhouettes a skillful thespian's gestures. And the obviously staged effect was distasteful to Whitney.

"My dear boy!" the Rector exclaimed as he stretched out both his hands and Harper silently shut the heavy divided door, with its cloister panel. "The prodigal has returned!"

"Returned but unrepentant!" Whitney smiled bitterly as he shook his uncle's hand without his usual warmth. "So slaying the fatted calf is hardly in order just yet. In fact, before I am through, you may be inclined to fall on my neck . . . and break it!"

"I trust that the apparent flippancy of your words does not reflect your state of mind," the Rector frowned haughtily. "You must certainly understand that I have ample cause to be vexed with you, my boy."

"I did not intend to be flippant," Whitney told him frankly. "In fact the attempt would be out of tune with my mood; yet we might just as well come to a clear understanding in the beginning. I have not come to beg your pardon nor to sue for lenience, but to urge you to right a very serious, if unintentional wrong."

The Rector's shoulders stiffened and his expression suggested that he, like the kings of old, was incapable of error. But he did not reply, and turned to arrange methodically a half-finished manuscript that was scattered over his study table.

"You have found me in the midst of composing a sermon," he said with intent to remind his nephew that his call was ill-timed . . . that his condescension in seeing him should be duly appreciated.

"I have not heard you preach recently," Whitney said pointedly, "but I have read certain reports of

your discourses. Frankly, I can hardly believe that you have been correctly quoted."

"Indeed?" the Rector interposed coldly. "Just what would lead you to assume that I have not been?"

"The incredible statements which are credited to you," Whitney told him calmly, and outraged resentment flashed from the clergyman's eyes.

"Whitney!" came the sharp reproof, "I will not permit such impertinence. It is quite sufficient that the attitude of younger folks gives *me* cause for criticism, without submitting to criticism myself."

"Which is precisely what's the trouble with your whole attitude!" Whitney came to the point. "Naturally, no one answers you when you speak from the pulpit, which is perhaps the reason why some of us who are fond of you have ceased attending service. But you can hardly expect that we mean to sit quietly while you libel us in a fashion that would result in legal action if the utterances came from a financially responsible corporation and not from an irresponsible clergyman."

"What abominable abuse!" the little man folded his hands and cast his eyes upward. Then his expression grew cunning, and he sat down to peer at his nephew across the table. "Am I to interpret your words as meaning that you seek financial balm?"

Whitney paled, and an unfrocked, younger man would have felt the force of his fist. "You know perfectly well that such a suggestion is not only uncalled for, but an insult of which I would not have supposed you capable. . . ."

"Yet you know that you cannot go to this singing-girl with an empty purse!" the Rector reminded him with virtuous justification. "Her longing for the flesh-pots has stifled all such sentiment as love. . . ."

But something in the tensing of Whitney's muscles warned him to pause, and he merely shrugged his

shoulders as his nephew came a step nearer and struggled with the fury that raged within him.

"I suppose you are aware," Whitney said after a time, "that the law would permit me to ask the courts to determine your sanity . . . and the kindest thing I can say of you is that I believe you demented."

"Do you realize what you are saying?" thundered the clergyman.

"I only wonder if *you* do!" Whitney answered quietly. "You have estranged yourself from those who have been taught to look to you for guidance . . . you have made yourself a laughing stock wherever the telegraph carries . . . and you've made a circus-tent of the church we cannot attend and preserve our self-respect."

"If the shoe fits, my dear nephew," the Rector recalled the saying with smooth intonation, a provoking smirk overspreading his smug, clean-shaven features.

"It doesn't fit, and you know it!" Whitney challenged. "I don't know how many thousands a year you receive for supplying the papers with such sensations, and the money you make doesn't tempt me to listen to you in silence. That you have seen fit to cut me off from the Duane inheritance . . . a trust handed down to you to pass on to me . . . is quite another matter, and I'll tell you honestly, that I resent your action. The men whose shrewdness amassed our family fortune would look upon you with the utmost contempt. . . ."

"Indeed!" sneered the Rector indignantly. "You infer that I lack respect for the name we both bear, yet you would make an *actress* the mother of future Duanes!"

"Yes," said Whitney slowly. "I would . . . and I hope that I may . . . and this nonsense you prate about the stage would be too silly to notice if it were not so unfair. An actress is not vastly different from any other woman . . . from your mother or mine,

from the woman who waits on your table or the one who washes your clothes. Environment may have something to do with morality, but women are good or bad in spite of their positions. Why some of the sex whom you welcome here are putrid by comparison . . . !”

“I hold no brief for well-born wrong-doers!” the Rector held up his hands. “If you have read my sermons, you must be aware of that. There is rottenness in high places as well as low stations, but I do not mean to spare anyone because of their wealth and position.”

“You arrant faker!” Whitney flashed at him, and the Rector gasped. “I might have known the folly of trying to reason with you, but now that I am here, I am going to tell you the truth and you’re going to listen to me, whether you like it or not. You attacked what occurred at Clifcleft because you were unsuccessful in your suit for the hostess’ hand. You hate Baptiste Stratini because he sees through your shams and openly brands you for the mountebank that you are. But Mrs. R.-S. and Stratti are sufficiently strongly intrenched to place you beneath their notice. . . .”

“This is preposterous!” cried the clergyman, rising and pacing the floor. “I will not be so maligned in the sanctity of my study!”

“You will listen until I have finished!” Whitney told him tensely, “and if it is needful to silence you, *I* shall go to the Bishop and tell him why I consider you a disgrace to your cloth; but as for things which concern me more, I shall handle them myself, and before I’m through with you, I’ll make you retract every word you’ve said against the woman I still hope to marry in spite of your unfounded libels!”

“Now let us be calm,” the Rector cut in, aware that the situation was slipping from his control. “You and

I are both Duanes, and it is not meet that we should besmirch our family escutcheon. . . .”

“I am not conscious of any unseemly behavior,” his nephew said. “It is you who have cheapened our name by signing it to twaddle unworthy of any pulpit, but that, I suppose, is more or less your own affair. . . . What concerns me is your remarks about Miss Drayton, and to tell you plainly, exactly the way I feel . . . every word you’ve uttered is a baseless, deliberate lie!”

“Whitney!” Doctor Duane bubbled with indignation. “You will withdraw that word!”

“I will,” Whitney smiled, “when you *prove* what you’ve told the papers about the woman I love.”

“Is further proof than I have given *needed* to make you realize why I have said these things?” the Rector vainly tried for conciliation. “Do you suppose I would have put all personal concerns behind me, have made enemies among my dearest friends, estranged my fellow churchmen . . . if I were not convinced of the righteousness of my cause?”

“Righteous rot!” exclaimed Whitney, resenting the other’s hypocritical defense. “You assume arbitrarily, that certain things cannot be good, and consequently, that anyone associated with those things, is of necessity bad. You never presumed to criticize anything done at Clifcleft until Mrs. R.-S. put an end to your absurd attentions, and you would never have troubled to lift your voice against Miss Drayton if it had not been for the patronage of Baptiste Stratini and the fact that you feared my interest in her might result in our marriage!”

“You are wrong, my boy, lamentably wrong,” the Rector rubbed his hands regretfully. “If I have not spared the lovely lady whose name you have seen fit to interject in our conversation, that fact only goes to prove my sincerity. If my stand against this singer has brought you anguish, does it not demonstrate that

I will not deviate from my well-founded convictions even to spare my own?"

"It does not!" Whitney answered abruptly, thoroughly out of patience with repeated attempts at evasion. "It *does* conclusively prove that you have made us the targets of your spite, and that you are disgracing the position you hold by making it serve your personal ends, socially and financially. It was bad enough when you were discovered on the payroll of certain millionaire cranks who pose as reformers; but your deliberate distortion of social conditions, in order to earn the checks of certain yellow journals, is beyond all excuse. Why, even the depths to which Estelle Delancey stoops can hardly be called worse!"

"So now it is Mrs. Delancey!" the Rector sighed and shook his head. "Really, my dear Whitney, your indictment is much too rambling to follow!"

"Is it?" snapped Whitney. "Do you mean to tell me you don't know her blackmailing game . . . how she accepts invitations and uses her entré to gather the gossip she sells to *Social Chat* and certain disgusting dailies?"

"Absurd!" the Rector refused to believe. "Your information carries you away . . . makes you behave very badly toward an estimable girl."

"Oh, does it?" Whitney shot at him. "It so happens that I can prove my statements. Only last week, Schermerhorn Van Vleet asked me to prepare the papers in a criminal action against the woman you choose to defend. . . ."

"My boy! You cannot mean that you propose to appear in such a proceeding . . . to lend yourself to such a disgraceful action in the courts?"

"No?" Whitney smiled sarcastically. "It *would* seem that we Duanes must relish notoriety. But in this instance, the fair Estelle went a step too far. Schermerhorn is not going to prosecute her if she will make a full denial of the story she gave to an editor

who tried to hold him up for fifty thousand to have its publication stopped. However, we mean to see that she quits this little game. . . .”

“There *must* be some mistake!” the Rector protested. “I cannot believe what you say, and I certainly fail to see how you can have evidence to prove it.”

“Can’t you?” sneered Whitney. “I have the best evidence in the world, in one instance . . . something I witnessed with my own eyes . . . a story circulated by Estelle about Miss Drayton, when it was Estelle herself who played the stellar rôle in the little farce I saw.”

“Then you, too, must have been involved,” the Rector charged. “Such first-hand knowledge could not have come to you if your own hands had been clean.”

“Do you suspect *everyone* of evil intent?” Whitney demanded. “Can you not conceive of anyone’s having decent motives?”

The Rector made a gesture of resignation. “Instead of refuting the statements I have made, you merely supply me with additional confirmation of the condition I have exposed.”

“Will you base a sermon on it?” Whitney inquired cynically. “It would make rather a good one . . . yet something of a boomerang, perhaps . . . showing how you both utilize the frailties of our social structure and increase your incomes!”

“Do you charge *me* with doing that?” the Rector cried, infuriated, yet shrinking under Whitney’s disapproval. “Do you presume to insinuate . . . ?”

“I insinuate nothing,” Whitney answered him firmly. “Either you are mad to see your name in print, or else you are making capital of what you profess to condemn; but as for the slightest effort to do good in the world . . . such an impulse is utterly foreign to your nature.”

“Whitney, my boy!” the clergyman faltered, resting

his head on his hands, "you overwhelm me with the extent of your ingratitude; yet I forgive you. . . ."

His nephew turned from him with a gesture of disgust; but the Rector went on.

. . . "I realize that it is only your unselfish love for this girl that has unbalanced your judgment . . . that causes you to be bitter against me. Can't you see that she cares nothing for you . . . that it is only the name and the fortune she thought you would bring her. . . ."

"You forget that she has refused me," Whitney reminded him coldly.

"Naturally!" triumphed the Rector. "That was to be expected . . . since you are no longer wealthy . . . but it is better so. Even if she were the type of woman your infatuation pictures, great singers are too temperamental to make desirable wives. The very life they lead, the public adulation . . . private flattery . . . the artificiality of the stage . . . all result in the undermining of true domestic happiness. . . ."

"Are you lecturing me?" Whitney interrupted. "It is a waste of time. Since you do not even know Miss Drayton, you cannot judge her. It is true that she expects and is entitled to a home becoming a woman of her talents. I could hardly ask her to marry me if I could not provide it; but I am satisfied that her reasons for refusing me are more deep-rooted than mere finances. Her real reason was not the fact that you decline to sanction our wedding; but was because of what you have said of her. Without one scrap of evidence, without giving her a chance to defend herself, you have damned Carol Drayton before the audiences who have not yet heard her sing . . . in the minds of thousands who have had no opportunity to learn to love her for herself. And who can blame her? No wonder she hates me because you are my relation . . . because your hypocritical concern for me and your

pretended pride of ancestry have permitted you to do her a wrong for which you cannot atone!"

"Then what do you *wish* me to do?" the Rector smiled indulgently, faintly amused.

"Hold your scandal-monging tongue!" Whitney faced him furiously. "It is not my province to censure your sermons, but I warn you that if you so much as hint of Miss Drayton or me from this moment on, I will settle the score with you personally . . . and if Miss Drayton ever changes her mind, I mean to make her the wife of the last of the Duanes."

"Then I wash my hands of you," his uncle said. "You have given me a bitter cross to bear, but I have the consolation of having done my duty!"

"That must comfort you tremendously," Whitney paused at the door. "If your conception of a clergyman's duty is defaming an innocent woman, I cannot agree with you; and if you consider the mission of the church the vilification of all our modern institutions, then you have robbed me of a great comfort . . . destroyed a beautiful, helpful belief which I shall sadly miss!"

IV.

"HE is kissing her!" Stratini reported over his shoulder in a whisper, "and I rather believe she's enjoying it!"

Standing in the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant library, he was peering through the partly open door of the music-room, where Aline and Gramercy Bleeker were together by the window in the fading twilight. Mrs. R.-S., just behind him, peeped over his shoulder and faintly smiled as she saw that the two were unaware of their presence.

"Silly!" she said to him softly, "shut the door at once before they hear you!"

Noiselessly, he did as she bade him, and then turned quickly to drink in the beauty of the woman at his side. Her cheeks were tinted from their afternoon ride in an open motor, and her eyes were sparkling with happiness as they laughed back at him, the mother love in their depths blending with the tenderness of her regard for Stratini.

"Beautiful one!" he cried out fervently, as he swept her into his arms and held her there quite helpless, although a willing prisoner, in his strong embrace. "Is it not wonderful that we may all be young together!"

"But I am *not* young, Stratti," she reproved him gently. "How *can* I be when Aline's quite grown up, and my son-in-law to-be has almost as many gray hairs as I. . . ."

"Tch!" he dismissed the suggestion. "Aline and Gramercy are but two great babies, while you and I shall never grow old no matter how long we live. In fact," he went on admiringly, as she laid aside her furs, "if you continue to be so lovely, I shall soon be forced

to grow jealous of good-looking striplings . . . especially the dancing men . . . and those about eighteen."

She smiled bewitchingly, and putting her head to one side appraised him quizzically. "And you?" she pretended to doubt him, "surrounded with beautiful women from morning till night, sought after, flattered, made much of . . . appealed to by damsels in distress, and hailed as the guardian angel of songbirds of gorgeous plumage. . . . I wonder whether I shall not have to look after my laurels?"

"Shall I swear eternal devotion . . . on my knees?" he asked, and his eyes twinkled. "I really hope you won't ask it, my dear. . . . I'm a trifle stiff from sitting so long in the car."

"Then I'll not exact it," she promised laughingly, "but you mustn't behave like Romeo and expect me to act like Juliet."

She pushed him away and settled herself in a comfortable fireside chair, while he stood with his back to the blazing logs and smiled down at her fondly. "Why not?" he asked. "It's an old theatrical saying that no woman is old enough to play the rôle until after she's forty. . . ."

"Then I'm eligible!" she assured him, "but in spite of your silly compliments, I hardly look the part."

He shrugged and leveled his monocle at her slender silken ankles, reflecting that her figure as well as her features were far more exquisite than those of many a débutante, and quite aware that her physical charm only added to the cause of his adoration . . . and Stratini had known many women, although he had never before asked one to marry him.

"There you are wrong. He shook his head and twirled the cord of his eye-glass. "It will be time enough to be sensible when we are senile. In the meantime we must not grow away from romance, for life would be dull without love, and love cannot thrive upon mere spiritual sentiment. So, I shall kiss you as much

as I like, and sometimes, you must flirt outrageously, just so that I may remember how beautiful you are . . . how utterly desirable younger and handsomer men find the woman I worship."

"You are incorrigible!" she laughed; "years of whispering flattery into pretty ears have made courtship a habit and an accomplishment . . . second nature to you. Why, Stratti, I don't believe you'd know *how* to be faithful!"

"You have taught me," he said with a little bow. "I have never *been* faithful, because no woman has ever possessed me completely . . . body, mind and soul . . . until now. No man *can* be faithful until a woman means everything to him . . . and when she does, he cannot be anything else . . . assuming that the man has the mental capacity to appreciate a woman who can dominate his passions and his thoughts to the exclusion of everything else."

"You believe that possible?" she asked skeptically.

"With some women . . . and some men. Others do not really *love* . . . they only try to delude themselves . . . and their folly ends in disaster. Love is purely mental, and whatever else it may demand is incidental . . . happiness prized the more highly, because the mind proclaims it perfect. To the connoisseur, only the flawless masterpiece is worthy of possession."

"Yet there *are* collectors who take pride in the *extent* of their treasures," she mused, "who cannot bear to think of a rival's having another rare specimen."

"Madam!" he glared at her. "I'm not wholly a pagan, and even if I desired to dabble in art, my modest fortune forbids my emulating . . . certain more wealthy patrons."

"Now sit down and try to be serious," she commanded abruptly. "I want to talk to you about Carol. . . ."

"Surely *you* are not going to accuse me . . . ?"

She stopped him with a gesture, but of course he was

not serious, and instantly he realized that Mrs. R.-S. was worried about their protégée!

"Carol has come to mean a great deal to me," she said, "and I know you are wrapped up in her. . . ."

"Naturally," he nodded. "She is the basis of the most wonderful experiment I have ever attempted . . . except the one I shall try to complete as your husband."

"Let us forget ourselves for the moment," she begged him earnestly. "You have done a wonderful thing for the girl . . . but somehow, I cannot feel that I've done my full duty. . . ."

"What more *could* you have done?" he demanded.

"Materially . . . nothing," she admitted, "but I wonder whether, in trying to help her, we have not completely destroyed her happiness."

"Absurd!" he snapped impatiently. "Do you think the only happiness worth having centers about an affair of the heart, or is bounded about by a wedding ring?"

"I did have some such notion . . . but perhaps it was absurd!" She looked up at him.

"That is unfair, my dear Eleanore!" he objected. "Marriage is excellent for Aline . . . it will keep her out of mischief . . . and the girl has nothing else in the world to occupy her mind. With you and me, it is different, too . . . it is high time we were married . . . yet perhaps we will be happier for having waited a while."

"Sometimes a woman can wait too long . . . and once her heart is broken, the hurt of it never heals. Baptiste, can't you see that she's utterly miserable?"

"Or imagines she is!" he shrugged.

"I *know* she is," Mrs. R.-S. insisted. "She would marry Whitney to-morrow if it were not for the things his uncle has said . . . unfair things, I grant you . . . but the direct result of our attempt to force her to an operatic career."

"Force her!" Stratini laughed sarcastically. "I

wonder how many women would pay any price I asked for the opportunity we have *given* her!"

"You're wrong there. She's paying for her chance . . . and paying a heavy price . . . for something that may mean less than nothing to her, even when it is hers."

"That all depends upon what she wants . . . but really, my dear, there is ample time to find out. If she deeply cares for Whitney, she will tell him so some day; and if he is as earnest as he seems to be, he will wait until that day comes. In the meantime, I am giving them both a chance to prove themselves . . . and giving our friend, the Rector, rope with which to hang himself!"

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Ah!" he cried, kissing his fingers to her. "That is my little secret . . . my little joke. As yet, we are not married . . . so you really cannot expect me to tell you everything."

"Unquestionably, you are the most exasperating man I ever knew!" she upbraided him.

"Which is, no doubt, why you love me!" he said with a smile. "I shall so strive to keep alive the spark of your affection."

"I must confess that, at times, I cannot understand you!" she told him, a little annoyed.

"It is because so few people understand me that I am able to do some things rather better than others," he said with sincerity. "Because my methods are somewhat unusual, my purpose is not suspected . . . and when my subjects unwittingly fall in with my plans, the *dénouement* is usually extremely interesting. For instance, you could not agree when I thought it unwise for you to resort to certain efforts in suppressing our friend, the Rector. I do not wish him silenced. Even a raving dogmatist has his place and his uses. I mean to use him . . . in my own way."

"You have not seen fit to confide in me, but I think you make a mistake," she said with conviction.

"Perhaps, but we shall see," he paused to light a cigarette. "Although you are willing to accept me as a husband, even *you* look upon me as a sort of freak. Like everyone else, you scoff at my peculiarities . . . poke fun at my actions. 'Do not mind him,' you say, 'It is *like* that crazy Italian to behave like a big buffoon!' Am I not right?"

"Almost," she smiled. "But now I suppose you are telling me not to interfere?"

"I had hoped you would not . . . just yet," he answered frankly.

"I've no doubt you know best," she sighed, "but Aline told me about the orchids yesterday. Don't you think you were rather brutal?"

"Of course. I meant to be. But where *is* our Songbird? I have not seen her since."

"Here; if I'm not interrupting," Carol herself replied, as she appeared from behind the portières, drawing back, hesitatingly, surprised to see them there.

"Naturally not," said Mrs. R.-S. "Do come in and join us . . . and please ring for some tea."

"A decanter would be more in order," Stratini turned to Carol. "I am parched, and besides . . . the Bishop is coming."

"Quite right," came a voice from the hallway. "In fact the Bishop is here, and he thanks you, sir, for your timely thoughtfulness."

Startled, and feeling as though she wished to run away, Carol looked into the laughing eyes of the Right Reverend Frederick Rhinebeck, whose tall form towered above her as he stepped into the room. Broad-shouldered and powerfully built, he looked like a militant churchman, and the hand which bore the episcopal ring was larger than even Stratini's, yet he placed it on Carol's arm with a gentle pressure, and

she felt instantly drawn to the man as he detained her with kindly insistence.

"So this is the charming surprise you have been keeping from me!" his rich tone chided, as he glanced toward Mrs. R.-S. "Is that quite fair when you know my fondness for singing?"

"Perhaps Stratti will be generous and let you hear her later," his hostess replied. "That is if Carol feels equal to the effort."

"Oh, I should love to!" Carol agreed, instinctively desiring to please him, and then felt a flush rush to her cheeks as she added with a smile, "only I'm afraid I don't know any proper songs!"

"My dear girl!" Bishop Rhinebeck protested, "you must not think we churchmen care for nothing but hymns . . . and I am particularly partial to many songs you must know."

"*There* he is!" came an outburst from the direction of the music room, and darting across the floor with the force of a whirlwind, Aline threw her arms about the Bishop's neck.

"Aline," he accused her solemnly, "it's useless to try to fool me! I know there's something you want, or you wouldn't greet me like that."

"I don't!" she pouted. "I don't want a single thing . . . but Gramercy does and he's too scared to ask you."

Rhinebeck laughed. "Then suppose you tell me the date, if it's been decided," he suggested, with a twinkle in his eye. "I suppose, of course, you'll wish to be married in the cathedral."

"How'd you guess it?" Aline pretended surprise, and Bleeker came grinning sheepishly into the room.

"Well, you see," the Bishop answered, "the symptoms become familiar . . . after one's officiated so often. Shall we drink to the health of these two?"

"You may drink *two* healths if you like!" Stratini chuckled, and naturally enough, the Bishop's glance

rested on Carol; but the expression he glimpsed in the depths of her eyes told him of his mistake, and inquiringly he turned to Mrs. R.-S.

"You've guessed it again!" Aline exclaimed, and her mother's color heightened as the Bishop extended his hand to Stratini.

"Now really, isn't this splendid!" he said with genuine pleasure, and, raising his glass, he pledged them his hearty good wishes. Then, with a friendly smile, he crossed to Carol. "Since these lovers will be all wrapped up in themselves, we can talk to our heart's content"; he put her at her ease, and leading the way to the davenport, begged her to tell him how her studies were progressing.

"And when do you make your *début*?" the Bishop inquired, when they had chatted some time, and Carol had quite forgotten her earlier consternation at finding herself in conversation with him.

"Some time this winter, I believe," she answered with pride, and thrilled at the thought of his interest. "Signor Stratini has promised that I shall have a small part, shortly after Christmas . . . but, of course, it will only be an unimportant one."

"But it is marvelous that you are to appear at all so soon!" he praised with enthusiasm, "and no doubt, with such a maestro, you will soon have a leading rôle. Do you know," he added thoughtfully, "God has given a wonderful gift to those who sing for us?"

"Then you do not . . . disapprove?" Carol found herself faltering, almost unable to believe what she heard him saying.

"Disapprove?" he smiled indulgently. "Why should I, my child? Somehow, whenever I am at the opera, I am conscious of a great inspiration . . . of a feeling that it is good to be there . . . and that I am a better man for listening to such voices."

V.

CAROL's début arrived unexpectedly, shortly after the New Year, when the Metropolitan season was at the height of its brilliance. And the announcement of her appearance set musical circles a-flutter . . . since Stratini's proposal upset all precedent. It came about one morning when the papers announced the sudden death of Renée Gironde's little daughter . . . killed in a motor mishap in the south of France. The prima donna collapsed when the cable came, and canceling all her contracts, prepared to sail at once.

Left with no logical *Carmen*, Stratini, with characteristic daring, named Carol to fill the place left vacant, and thereby stirred up a hornet's nest in musical circles. That an unknown, untried pupil of even so famous a maestro, should be cast for the rôle of Bizet's *gitana*, stunned the loyal admirers of grief-stricken Gironde . . . but in spite of the diva's tears and overwrought temperament, the great Gironde herself laughed at the news when she learned it at the steamship dock. She branded Stratini as *imbecile*, vented her wrath upon the reporters, and predicted the early fall of the Metropolitan's prestige.

The opera guarantors held a star-chamber session indignantly to protest, and the boxholders smiled and shook their heads as rumors again grew rife; but Stratini was adamant. No possible pressure could move him, and at once he proceeded to tighten up Carol's intensive training. Only three short weeks intervened before the proposed performance, and the impresario spent night and day in schooling his star, smiling the while and refusing to listen to reason. He personally supervised her practice of each movement and gesture, consulted at length with costumers,

and himself rehearsed her in scene after scene, down to the minutest detail. Each snap of her fingers was timed, each flutter of eyelids cadenced, until every bar of the music synchronized with her acting.

Carol lived and fairly breathed in an atmosphere suggestive of old Seville . . . of castanets and cigarettes, and the strumming of soft guitars . . . and slowly and painstakingly the maestro created his *Carmen*. He taught her new tricks of twitching her head, and how to flirt with her shoulders . . . to flash her eyes and click her heels, and swish a bright-colored shawl with languorous lure. He made her up with studious skill, and her hair was dressed over and over, until her mantilla draped itself with ravishing fascination.

Frightened at first at the prospect, Carol soon caught the spirit which prompted Stratini to stage this surprise, and by the time she began to sing with the rest of the company, even the jealously dubious acclaimed her as a find. Those rehearsals were held with the auditorium empty, and even the chairman of the board was barred from the wings while Carol trod the stage, and Stratini tried out new touches which made his creation more charming.

This element of suspense was a part of his plan, and as he shrewdly suspected, it stimulated interest. The night of Carol's premiere would be a memorable one, and Stratini took full advantage of her being a protégée of the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant family; winking his eyes and holding his tongue at whatever was said of himself in connection with Carol. Press agents were busy preparing copy, and Carol was photographed in a series of artistic poses, all of which made the public, as well as the opera subscribers, eager to hear this discovery, whose personal beauty was obvious if her talent was still uncertain.

Yet the incarnation of *Carmen* which Carol was becoming could not be solely attributed to Stratini's

molding. . . . From the first moment of her training, she had fancied herself in the rôle, and now she threw herself into it with unbounded enthusiasm. Physically, she was ideal for the part, and enhanced by the arts of the theater, she made a perfect portrait of the lovely, lawless hoyden whose escapades were a scandal in the streets of Seville, which made Carol smile when she thought that her portrayal would likewise cause a scandal in the most sacred precincts of social Manhattan.

For her début offered the moment for which she had been waiting, and she meant to make it accomplish a double purpose. Aside from her own ambition, there was the obligation she owed her incorporators. Now, if she were successful, she might pay her debt and find herself independent, a singer whose reputation would have been made overnight. Once solidly intrenched in the hearts of the public, she need no longer have any financial fears. But these were by no means the only things the situation suggested. The reputation she meant to gain must compensate, in some measure, for another reputation which she had irrecoverably lost.

In the weeks that had passed since that Saturday afternoon at Claremont, she had spent many hours alone with her thoughts. Although unaware of Whitney's call on the Rector, she was conscious of some subtle change in the man who loved her, and that he cared more than ever was all too obvious, despite the fact that she failed to understand what motives prompted the course he seemed to have chosen. The following Monday, she had received a note by messenger, begging her to receive him at her convenience. It contained no hint of his purpose, no declaration of love, but only a brief but earnest request that she see him.

Her first impulse was to answer yes, and to talk with him frankly, yet lack of confidence in herself

made Carol decide otherwise. And later on, as Doctor Duane arose to new heights of oratory, she was glad that she had done so. He seemed to forget the "follies of families of fashion," as he had titled his earlier series of sermons, and now he concentrated his fire on the "shameless sirens who sing of sin from the stage!"

Stratini had laughed good-naturedly, and he voiced the candid opinion that the Rector was wasting his time . . . that the clergyman should have sold his alliteration to the management of some traveling circus. But if newspaper readers also smiled, and the Rector's expressions grew to be bywords on Broadway, this relentless vituperation had another effect upon Carol. She not only felt that Doctor Duane had separated her from his nephew, but that he had given her little alternative in choosing the guise in which to appear as a singer. Of course he had failed to mention her by name, and his references had been cunningly veiled since Whitney's visit; nevertheless, his finger pointed plainly to her, and now that she was on the eve of her first appearance, the press agent Stratini engaged did not fail to use this peg on which to pin his stories.

Bishop Rhinebeck's kindly attitude, and the cold indifference maintained by the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant household, had made her callous in one respect, to public opinion. Yet in spite of the fact that she was to blame for Whitney's silence, Carol felt resentful over his seeming docile submission to his uncle's attacks. So now that she might make her name stand for whatever she willed, she resolved to give the Rector a fund of facts for his rantings, and to let Whitney see how little she cared what any Duane might think of the girl who would soon be the talk of the musical world.

She recalled, a little bitterly, her emotions that night at Clifcleft, when she had made a like resolve to shock the guests at the beach-party; and she reproached herself at the memory of her miserable failure . . . of

her complete surrender when Whitney had pleaded his cause. But this time it would be different. Once and for all, she meant to sever relations with him, and henceforth her quest for happiness would be within her career. Cables would carry the story of her success abroad. There would be contracts, perhaps, in London and Paris and Rio, and her place in the list of notables would be more secure than that of remaining royalty. In time, she would have her fling at this Rector who had defamed her, and she meant to forget completely the incidents of the past which had been laid to rest in the library at Clifcleft.

Not since the day when Stratini had bade her live in the present, had she let her mind dwell on the month she had spent in prison. The events which led to her conviction seemed like some hazy dream, some imaginary existence which really never had been. No one could bring back that hurt, and no one would know of its scar, so now her only care need be to steel herself to her purpose.

At last came the afternoon when she rested alone in her room, in order to be fresh for the ordeal of the great evening. Mrs. R.-S. was having guests for dinner at eight, but Carol, of course, would not be of their number, for long before the liqueurs were served, she would be in her dressing room. Swathed in furs against the biting cold of the evening, she stepped across the pavement to the R.-S. limousine, just as the hands of her wrist watch pointed to seven. Lights were sparkling brightly, motor horns had a joyous note as they honked on the clear, still air, and the city seemed to Carol to quiver with eager excitement.

Yet to her surprise, she found herself unexpectedly calm, determined and fully confident as she leaned back against the cushions, peering from the car window with half-closed eyes. As a bride-to-be looks forward to her ride to the church, Carol had longed for this one on her way to the opera. Never had she

felt so well, nor experienced such elation . . . nor was she even impatient for the fall of the final curtain. She meant to enjoy each moment of what *must* be her triumph, and, devoid of all feeling of stage-fright, she peremptorily dismissed all admission of possible failure.

Yet as the motor sped west through Fortieth Street, Carol found herself depressed as she realized her state of mind. If she were on her way to sing for the man she loved, if her object was to please and not to disgust him, she would have found her cup running over with sheer delight. As it was, her exaltation could only mean his dejection . . . but it was too late to turn back now . . . there was no time to reconsider . . . and perhaps, as Stratini had often said, her silent suffering would result in her singing better.

Halted at Broadway, to let the traffic stream flow with torrential force, Carol endeavored to regain her poise before the car should pause by the curb of the stage entrance. In the lights which flamed beneath the great *porte-cochère* of the yellow brick opera house, she could glimpse the play bills flanking the entrance. For the first time, she caught the flash of her own name, printed in giant letters on the poster. And in spite of the feeling she sought to forget, the sight gave her a start . . . an electric shock which acted like a tonic. Soon the doors would be open and the audience streaming in, the musicians taking their places, and then the expectant hush . . . at last the night of which she had dreamed was a dream no longer!

A mounted policeman's whistle started her from her reverie, in which she pictured a contrast from her present position . . . a night when she had sat on a bench, alone in Central Park . . . when, from afar, she had looked at the glare of Broadway . . . wondering whether to search for peace in the reservoir or the river. The limousine was moving now, slowly

and silently making it way up the side street, and pausing before the door which opened upon . . . Carol was wondering what?

A liveried attendant bowed as she stepped to the pavement, electric signs blinked at her, and passers-by gaped at the girl who wrapped her furs about her, and hurried across the sidewalk into the narrow entry. Before she passed that way again, her future would have been decided, and Carol Drayton would be on the highroad to fame . . . or down in the depths of despair.

The doorman touched his cap and Carol gave him a smile, as self-possessed as though she were used to his greeting. Down the narrow passageway she caught a glimpse of a brightly illumined vastness, and the dusty mustiness of the stage, mingled with odors of grease-paint and the scent of oils and canvas, assailed her nostrils. Men in overalls were moving great frames, lashing together the parts of the set which would form the first scene. Somewhere she heard a violinist, tuning his instrument, and from a distant dressing-room came the pleasing sound of some singer testing his tones.

Then out of the shadowy dimness, stepped a man in evening dress, a single eye-glass glittering in the glow of a wire-shielded bulb.

"So you are prompt!" Stratini smiled, consulting his watch. "That is good. No *artiste* worthy of the name ever keeps her associates waiting."

"I thought you would be at the apartment," Carol said in surprise, as Stratini led the way to her dressing-room.

"Dinner is not until eight," he reminded her, "and those who imagine I do not work, should see me here. With nine-tenths of the world so stupid, there is ever so much to do . . . and behind the scenes I find everyone is better for being watched."

"Do you drive them all as you drive me?" Carol

asked with a laugh, and Stratini nodded his head with complete satisfaction.

"To-night, my dear," he told her, "I shall claim the kiss which is to be my reward; and I'm sure I shall have earned it when the critics learn I was right in my judgment of you."

"I'll give it to you gladly!" she put her gloved hand on his arm with intense emotion, "and I'll never forget that you did not ask any more. . . ."

"But I *did*!" he reminded her, standing on the threshold of the boudoir-like apartment where her maid was waiting.

"No, you didn't!" her eyes flashed gratitude. "I understand why you said what you did . . . now; but I wonder if *you* will understand what I mean to do to-night."

Her voice faltered a trifle, but Stratini only smiled and slowly nodded his head.

"I think so, Songbird," he whispered, "but I'm not going to tell you the secret I suspect. All that I ask, my dear pupil, is that you will sing like the devil!"

Carol nodded, and her laugh was meant to be gay, as she struck a Castilian pose and threw herself into the character he had taught her so completely. "Just wait!" she promised, closing her eyes seductively, and flashing fire through her lashes. "If you were the devil himself, you'd have no cause to complain of my voice or my acting to-night. New York never heard such a *Carmen* as I mean to *be*!"

"*Bravo!*" he clapped his hands. "We shall show them, you and I . . . but now I must hurry, or I shall be late for dinner."

And like an eager schoolboy, bursting to tell the news of her splendid spirit, he shouted at the top of his lungs to have his car at the door. Then as she stood looking after him as he hurried along the cor-

ridor, he paused to glance over his shoulder and shake his finger at her.

"Remember!" he cautioned sternly, "you must not step out of that room . . . and no one is to be admitted. You will dress and rest, and wait . . . until I return. You are not to talk . . . you are not to *think!* . . . and remember that from this moment, you are not Carol Drayton, but a reckless, heartless coquette named *Carmen* . . . a cigarette girl who will go to jail if she does not charm her captor!"

The draught-door slammed, and he was gone.

Why had he said that? she wondered . . . whether or not his warning had been deliberate . . . whether he meant to remind her that *she* had been in prison . . . and to suggest that her singing, and her acting to-night, could liberate her forever from everything she dreaded, if only she played her part with heart-felt abandon.

"I will! I will!" she cried, as she entered the dressing-room, and, closing the door abruptly, stood with her back against it.

In another mood she might have felt afraid of her maid, embarrassed that the woman had witnessed this outburst; but Stratini's words had proved potent and pregnant with inspiration, and as she slipped out of her soft warm wrap, her whole personality underwent a complete metamorphosis.

"Bah!" she snapped her fingers in the face of the maid. "Stop staring at me and find me a cigarette!" And tearing her toque from her head, she flung it across the room.

Used to the tantrums of stars, the maid was not even surprised, but even a little gratified that Carol was not going to prove a nervous and diffident tyro. So she held a match for Carol, who blew the smoke from in front of her eyes with an impatient gesture, and carelessly glanced at the cards attached to the flowers which literally filled the room.

Then the tray of telegrams on the edge of her dressing table caught her attention, and she ran through them hastily, tossing them to the floor as she read them one by one. Buried beneath the others, was one which she read more carefully, and then thrust it into her bosom. It was from Bishop Rhinebeck, wishing her every success and regretting that churchly business detained him out of town.

For a moment she felt she must burst into tears, and then she grew suddenly glad, for she doubted if she could go through with all she proposed if the Bishop was watching her from the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant box. Yet now that she knew he would not be there, she felt a sense of freedom, and once more her spirit soared in spite of her heart's depression.

Standing before her mirror, stripped of her street clothes, her hair hung about her bare shoulders, and her cigarette completed the picture of a lawless *gitana en dishabille*. Her maid was taking her costume from the hangers behind the curtains, as Carol kicked off her pumps and stepped into red-heeled slippers, and their unfamiliar highness caused her to lose her balance. With a little cry, she fell to her knees, overturning a table piled with bouquets, and she found herself buried beneath an avalanche of flowers.

"*Bien!*" exclaimed the maid, no longer alarmed, as she realized that Carol was not hurt. "It is an omen . . . a sign that the fates are smiling . . . since the flowers wish to come to you even before the performance!"

But as Carol regained her feet, the tears came to her eyes, and she silently stared at a tiny card her fingers had clasped unintentionally. It was Whitney's . . . and detached from the blooms he had sent, she could not tell which bouquet was his . . . but what he had written impressed itself indelibly on her mind. . . . "*May to-night's applause bring the happiness you deserve!*" . . . And nothing more.

Whitney would be in front . . . with eyes for no one but her . . . and his ears would drink in her every note . . . eagerly hoping one might contain a message of cheer for him. The slightest slip and she might fail in the thing she meant to do . . . and failure would only serve to sound the depths of his sympathy.

"Madame is superstitious?" the maid whispered fearfully. . . .

"Certainly not!" Carol cried, with a careless toss of her head. "I'm in perfect voice and I mean to act as few singers can!" Then as she turned away, she tore the card to shreds, and hurled the tiny bits at her reflection in the mirror. "Oh, yes, I'll *act!*" she told herself as she stifled a sob. "No one knows it but God, but *God knows I'm acting now!*"

VI.

AWAITING the moment of her entrance cue, Carol stood in the wings, surrounded by the chorus of gayly-clad cigarette girls, in stiff silks and fringed brocades, their eyes, half-veiled by mantillas, regarding the untried star with curious anticipation. At her side stood Stratini, pretending unruffled calm, but inwardly apprehensive now that the final test was at hand. Yet Carol might have been an experienced diva, to judge from her own restrained, if somewhat eager demeanor, and the impresario was frankly and proudly amazed at her rare self-possession.

The asbestos drop still hid the vast auditorium, and the majestic sweep of the strings was far away and ghostlike, their ominous strains mingling with lugubrious brasses in foreboding the opera's grim conclusion. Listening to the prelude's dramatic crescendo of conflicting primitive passions, Carol felt that the Fate *motif* echoed her own emotions. The overture's prophecy of impending disaster warned her to beware . . . then the reckless abandon of the score, insidious in its seduction, made her blood tingle and her pulses beat the faster. *The March of the Toreadors* and the spirited song of *Escamillio* thrilled her, suggesting the countless coquetties she meant to display; then the somber, audible shadow of an appalling dénouement stunned her enthusiasm as the movement suddenly ceased with a detached chord . . . and the curtain arose.

A current of air, the restless settling of the audience, and the louder notes of the great orchestra told her the moment had come. Stratini was saying something, but Carol could not hear him. Babel broke loose and she found herself struggling in the midst

of the chattering cigarette girls as they dashed into the canvas-walled public square and the full glare of the footlights. A striking figure in that vivid, colorful ensemble, Carol was at once the center of attention; then like the rumble of thunder, breaking into a roar, salvos of applause drowned the din on the stage and the strains of the music.

For the moment, the brilliance of the lights blinded her and the front of the house presented a space of inky darkness in which she could make out nothing. Yet Carol knew that her friends, and no doubt Whitney too, were there in the pit and the boxes of the Horseshoe; and somehow she found herself bowing a smiling acknowledgment to their enthusiastic applause. She dared not trust herself to peer too intently in the effort to find a familiar face in the sea that took on a semblance of human forms, and with a little sigh of renewed determination, she threw herself with verve into her sparkling rôle.

Eyes flashing, jewels sparkling, she gave a swish to her fringed skirt and placed her hands on her hips. She threw back her head with an impudent toss, and her body undulated in sinuous cadence to the click of her castanets, as she spied the yellow uniform of Marcel Delatour, cast as usual, in the rôle of the brigadier *Don José*. From the top of her towering comb to the tips of her high-heeled *zapatos*, Carol made a picture to fascinate the dashing young dragoon, and despite his pretended indifference, the tenor was visibly moved as he watched her. Delatour had sung as the luckless soldier to half a dozen *Carmens*, but never had one appeared so compelling as the slender girl before him. He found her superb . . . with more fire than the great Gironde . . . and he meant to respond to her acting with eager fervor.

Carol displayed *Carmen's* pique with admirable insolence, and *Don José's* fate was sealed indeed, as he heard the first of her notes in the famous *Habanera*.

Her graceful, Spanish gait was alluring in its suggestion as she edged through the throng to his side. Wild, unbridled passion seemed to blaze from her eyes, and kindled an answer in his, as her glorious voice flowed out into the amphitheater. Its sensuous, dreamy melody held her hearers enthralled, and she breathed the very spirit of the gay, warm-blooded gypsy who neither cared for nor understood any code of convention, save that of unconventional, elemental passion.

Now, out of the haze beyond the rows of glittering footlights, she suddenly recognized Aline in the Rhinebeck-Sturdevant box. Bleeker was standing behind her, and Mrs. R.-S. herself was intent on the stage. Carol arched her eyebrows and Aline caught her signal as a girlish look of delight crept over her features, tense with the excitement of longed-for realization. Then the *directeur* signaled, and Carol was *Carmen* again, gazing through lowered lashes at the handsome *Don José*.

Brilliancy and dash, mingled with utter abandon, made her doubly captivating, and now, soulless suggestion flashed from her languishing glances. Slowly she edged toward the brigadier, peering up into his face and displaying the turn of her ankle, temptingly tantalizing in every snake-like movement. Then the audience gasped as her passion grew threatening, and she seemed like a devil incarnate as she sounded her sweet notes of warning . . .

"If thou me lovest not, I love thee,

"And if I love thee, now beware!

"But if I love you, if I love you, beware!

. . . Beware!"

Her wiles and her blanchments blended with brazen *diablerie*, and those in front, like the soldier, were utterly under her spell. Her exit was echoed with "*Bravos!*" and the stage seemed empty the moment this horribly glorious creature was gone. And in spite

of the lyric beauty of Olga Nazamoff's voice, *Micaela's* duet with Delatour left its audience cold.

From his place beside the electrician's board, Strattini sensed this evidence of Carol's victory, and in an instant he knew that his pupil's fame was secure. Those in front were eager for her return to the stage; even *blasé*, seasoned patrons had lost their air of *ennui*. And now she was there again, her deviltry bubbling over as she danced sensuously to the rhythmic *Seguidilla*. All too apparent as it was that she sang of the vulgarest love, the audience could not blame *José* for his blind infatuation. Stirred to the depths by her acting, critics and music lovers found themselves enraptured by her physical lure and the charm of her marvelous singing.

Vainly searching the orchestra stalls, and running her eyes round the boxes, Carol sought for a glimpse of the man to whom she was really singing, the man she was striving to impress, rather than Delatour . . . but in the glare of the spotlights, her vision was dim, and could not find Whitney Duane. Yet during that quick inspection she grew conscious of the flash of Titian hair and the gleam of creamy shoulders. Piercing eyes seemed focused on her, and she rather relished the scrutiny of an evidently bewildered Estelle Delancey. Carol recalled that night on the beach, and its subsequent story, and somehow a spirit of mischief prompted her to let herself go and *live* her rôle to the limit.

Hands tied, yet woman-wise, she began to sing to *Don José* of the *Inn of Lillas Pastia*, tormenting the man with hints of her love and the revelry to be found, nigh unto the walls of Sevilla. Each movement intoxicating, she held her lips close to his, her head against his epaulette, her eyes deep pools of temptation . . .

“. . . but alone one's joys are few
“Our pleasures double, shared by two . . .”

"I think," whispered Gramercy Bleeker into the ear of Aline, "that the bird's going to fall for it . . . and I'm sure I don't blame him a bit!"

"Be still!" his fiancée reproved him, with a twinkle in her eyes, and then she sighed softly as Carol sang on . . .

"But this new love, he loves me well;
"And him to choose my mind is bent!"

Of course the maddened *Don José* cut the cord which bound her, but it seemed that Carol's cunning had earned her freedom without recourse to the custom of operatic score. The house went wild as the scene reached its climax, and from that moment until the fall of the first curtain, Carol's ovation became a steady, tremendous crescendo.

"The man's a fool!" Bleeker opined, with a side-long glance at Aline, "but who *wouldn't* pass up *Micaela* for Carol Carmen Drayton!"

"Of course *you've* no sense of duty!" Aline pretended iciness, "but just the same I'm glad that you're not a tenor. Oh, look!" she clutched at his arm. "She's coming out again . . . everyone's gone insane!"

Her voice was hardly audible amid the shouts and clapping, and the galleries broke from all restraint as the gods howled out their joy. Carol stood before the drop on the apron of the stage, deluged by flowers and hailed with delight that knew no bounds, yet, smiling and charming as she was, Mrs. R.-S. thought she saw a wistful, almost heart-broken look in the depths of the girl's eyes.

Then as the noise died down and the auditorium lights flashed on once more, Mrs. R.-S. looked about and bit her lip in annoyance. Whitney was not in his seat, and she understood the emotion which had driven him to the foyer, yet somehow she felt herself out of patience with him. If Carol was not to find

her triumph a hollow sham, those for whom she cared must share in it with her . . . and Whitney's disapproval would naturally prove a blow . . . unless the dawning suspicion she felt was sanely founded. Perhaps Carol had tried to impress him as she had Mrs. R.-S. . . . with a sense of repulsion that fondness refused to mitigate. But now as she saw a group of friends approaching her box, she turned to ask what Aline and Bleeker were chuckling about.

"Oh, Mummy!" Aline exclaimed in sheer delight. "Honestly, he's too funny for words!"

"Who is?" her mother inquired, following her gaze, and as she did so her eyes encountered the Rector's. Stern and pompous as he sat in his orchestra chair, Mrs. R.-S. was aware of the clergyman's agitation. His fingers tapped the arms of his seat and a frown enveloped his features, while the twitching of his shoulders showed how difficult he found it to contain himself.

She returned his rather stiff nod with an effort at cold composure, but under other conditions, she would have been constrained to smile. That Carol's characterization had horrified the man, was all too obvious, yet surrounded as he was by the elite of his flock, he hardly felt this the time for an outraged outburst. Not that he would not have gloried in causing such a sensation, but because he was dubious of the results of such an unheard of attempt. Fully aware that the eyes of the press were watching him curiously, Doctor Duane was obliged to exert the utmost self-repression. To stand in his place and thunder his wrath at the proscenium arch, appealed to his highly developed dramatic instincts; yet the fear of being laughed at, of perhaps being hooted down, advised him that such a course would be extremely ill-advised.

So the fact that, during the entire act, he held himself aloof, gave evidence of the Rector's certain uneasiness. His presence and his apparent mood did not

pass without comment, especially among the gay, chatting men and women who flocked to the R.-S. box. Since Stratini had strictly forbidden it, neither Aline nor her mother made any move to go back on the stage in the intermission, although Aline could hardly wait for the opera's close, so that she might peek into Carol's dressing-room. Mrs. R.-S., however, was almost as ill at ease as the lonely clergyman, and, try as she might, she could not content herself while she was being stormed with congratulations. Naturally Carol's success, in a greater or lesser degree, was generally attributed to the sponsorship of the Rhinebeck-Sturdevants, which now made their box the mecca of the socially faithful.

Yet those who watched from afar with envious eyes observed that Estelle Delancey remained alone in her box, deserted by her former friends, and even without her husband, who, it was covertly whispered, now considered divorce. Mrs. R.-S. had ignored Estelle and Aline had avoided her eyes, yet she bore their ostracism without a sign of flinching, and a look of supreme satisfaction lurked in her cryptic expression. Just why she had chosen to bear this public snub alone, gave rise to idle gossip, and even prompted suspicion as to her ultimate purpose.

Then as the audience sought its seats, and the house grew dark again, Mrs. R.-S.'s shoulders stiffened with surprise. Whitney Duane was closing the door of the Delancey box, and now with a pleasant nod and a whispered word, he sat down beside Estelle. She showed not the slightest sign that she considered his coming anything but usual, and it was instantly evident that he joined her by appointment. From his orchestra chair, the Rector bowed to his nephew stiffly, and his puzzled air showed that he too lacked any understanding of Whitney's unexpected presence . . . all the more amazing in view of what Whitney had said concerning his chosen companion.

But the curtain put an end to curious speculation, and Carol arose to greater heights as the tavern scene unfolded its tale of infatuation and *Don José's* struggle with duty. Whitney Duane was silent as Carol began to dance with even greater enchantment and with each click of her castanets, set her stage-lover's hot blood surging. Whitney bit his lip in the scene where *Carmen* shows herself drawn to the *Toreador*, and when *Zuniga* appraised her with proprietary air, Whitney's anguish reflected itself in the paleness of his features.

But it was not until the mountain scene, when she read her fate in the cards, that Carol actually seemed the embodiment of *Carmen*. Casting the hated spades away in a tantrum of fury, her work was superb as she sank into the depths of despair. During the duel and the conflict of jealousies in its wake, it was evident that her acting preyed deeply upon her emotions, and the audience *felt* her shudder when she leaned against a boulder to watch *Don José* and *Micaela* depart from the smugglers' camp.

To Whitney it seemed as though she depicted her own future, and he had no heart to witness the tragic finale the coming act would present. So as the curtain fell, he slipped away by himself, and as Carol accepted the plaudits which rang out in a furor of tribute, she sought in vain for Whitney's face in the shouting, clapping throng, which arose to its feet *en mass* in unbounded admiration.

Her thoughts went back to the night, when singing the *Habanera*, she had fainted and fallen, and Whitney had thrown her a coin as she slipped into the fountain. To-night, he did not even add his mite of polite approval to the tremendous ovation Carol had earned. The absence of even the slightest expression from him told her that if he had heard and seen, her plan to arouse his loathing must have succeeded *too* well. And with a sob that chilled her heart, she

dashed to her dressing-room, ignoring Stratini and slamming the door so that she might be alone.

But even then she would not give way to the misery her triumph had brought her, for there still remained the final act in which to complete the picture . . . in which to make her audience feel that she did not *act* . . . that she merely gave it a glimpse of her innermost, sordid soul.

VII.

PAUSING by the portal of his private office, Stratini looked over his shoulder toward the wings, through which he could glimpse the stage, set as the *Plaza de Toros*. The last act was in full swing, and above the majestic sweep of the orchestra, Carol's clear notes rang out with mellifluous tone and volume. Slowly, the expression of seriousness on the impresario's features gave way to a smile of satisfaction, and, stepping into his sanctum, he softly closed the door.

Gladly, he would have remained in his place behind the proscenium arch to hear his pupil sing to the final curtain, but a deep, overpowering emotion had turned his silent footsteps to the room where he reigned supreme. Alone there, his intensely dramatic nature enabled him to enjoy to the full the fruits of his labors, without any need of masking the powerful sentiment surging within him. Even now, at the climax of his endeavors, he preferred to maintain, in the presence of others, the cynical exterior which concealed the generosity underlying his achievement. But Stratini was so genuinely moved that he could no longer preserve his poise nor veil the prideful, parental affection which stirred his dynamic being.

"It is done!" he murmured, as he relaxed in his swivel chair. "She is *made* . . . and Stratini's judgment is vindicated!"

The emerald-shaded lamp on his desk shed a sympathetic light upon the glistening moisture about his joyful eyes; and impatient over his weakness, Stratini wiped them brusquely with a great silk handkerchief. Then, lest by chance, this display of human

frailty might have been observed, he sonorously blew his nose.

Faintly, yet distinctly, the familiar muted music was wafted through the walls to his ears, and his imagination pictured the action of the opera as it drew to its tempestuous close. From the walls, countless photographs of noted stars looked down upon Stratini fondly. *Carmens* of other days challenged him to compare them adversely with the one who was singing now; and *directeurs* whose laurels were memories, beamed upon their successor in fully understanding congratulation. Framed programs recalled other gala nights, and revived associations long laid in lavender, while the handbill spread on his knee pled for preservation in company with these reminders of earlier glory.

With a whimsical smile he examined the box-office report placed on his desk in his absence. Its figures laughed at deficits and would delight the directors, but Stratini ignored the dollars and cents, and only regarded the crowded house as homage to his Song-bird. Naturally curiosity had played a part in their coming, but after to-night nothing would keep Carol's admirers away. What credit was his he accepted with silent gratification, yet he knew that his teaching alone had not brought about Carol's conquest. What he had done was well enough, but he had still more to do . . . and impatiently he awaited the outcome of the evening.

Musing in silence, he reached for a Russian cigarette and deeply inhaled its fragrance as someone quietly opened the door and stood still on the threshold. His expression changed in an instant as he wheeled about in his chair, and then, in spite of his grip on himself, an exclamation escaped him. Having come back-stage from her box, Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant was smiling in at him, fearful lest even her welcome in-

trusion might interrupt the maestro in some important planning.

"Come in!" he called, rising eagerly. "Isn't she wonderful, Eleanore. . . . I knew she had it in her!"

"She's the greatest *Carmen* I ever heard!" Mrs. R.-S. enthused, "but I shuddered each time she appeared. . . . Stratti it was *horrible* . . . magnificent but incredible, that beneath her make-up . . . *that she-devil was Carol!*"

"I told you she could *act* . . . that day when she hurled the candlestick at me!" he reminded her with amusement.

"But she *wasn't* acting then," Mrs. R.-S. objected. "You had hurt her cruelly."

"Precisely," Stratini agreed. "It was much the same to-night, only, instead of Stratini alone, hundreds witnessed the breaking-out of her pent up passion."

"Is the stage so *unreal* to you that cannot understand how it frightened me when I saw her like *that?*" Mrs. R.-S. implored him. "Pretense that it was, her characterization is far from a lovable one. Now and then the spirit that flashed from her eyes was revoltingly hideous! One almost dreaded the fate of the men who loved her!"

Stratini shrugged. "One *does* pity the lovers of really great singers. I know . . . I have felt the impulse which comes when one succumbs to their wiles. . . ."

"You cannot compare Carol . . . with Gironde for instance!" she flashed at him indignantly . . . not a little jealously, perhaps. "Yet to-night her vile-ness seemed so *inborn* that I found myself almost despising her . . . completely forgetting that her success is my dearest desire."

Upset, she tapped the top of his desk with her fan, and he watched the glitter of jewels at her throat as the faint light of the lamp made them sparkle

when her quick breathing caused her collarette to rise and fall. "It is a terrible thing to believe that a woman *can* be like that," she shuddered. "Poor Whitney was stunned as he watched her."

Stratini nodded. "His evident woe would have made a vampire relent!"

"It was positively pathetic . . . his distress!" Mrs. R.-S. sympathized. "He never took his eyes from her; and once, when Delatour held her in his arms . . . and she *kissed* him . . . shockingly . . . I thought poor Whitney would leap across the foot-lights."

"Bah!" the impresario waved his hand deprecatingly. "I'm glad Carol did not observe him. Many a performance has been ruined by just such untimely displays of personal sentiment."

"You must admit," Mrs. R.-S. defended, "that Whitney could hardly relish all that he saw. Would you like to see me in another man's arms . . . inviting him with every lure a woman can express . . . with her lips, her eyes, her voluptuous features . . . and even her very gestures?"

Stratini burst out laughing, and his great form shook with mirth at her impossible suggestion. "My dear Eleanore! *You couldn't* do it . . . it isn't *in* you!"

"You mean that I am not sufficiently fascinating . . . not wanton enough . . . ?" Her tone was a little hurt, although she sensed the compliment he meant to imply.

"Eleanore!" he protested. "You know you couldn't enact a rôle like that . . . no woman *can* unless she has really been dragged in the mire and holds the world in contempt . . . except in the rarest of instances . . . and Carol is not one of them. Yet Carol has done a remarkable thing in making even you feel that the conscienceless creature you watched was really a harlot at heart."

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" she said hastily, horrified at his inference, "and I suppose you'll laugh at me when I tell you what I *did* think. . . ."

"Shall I tell *you*?" he asked with a smile. "She cared not a snap of her fingers for the applause she earned, and I have no doubt that her every *risqué* movement caused her exquisite pain . . . yet she was determined to disgust just one man in her audience . . . which is why she appeared to give herself to Delatour as she did."

Mrs. R.-S. nodded, reluctant to have him confirm her theory. "Yet since it is certain she loves him, how can she torture him so? She cannot fairly blame Whitney for what the Rector has said. . . ."

"Should not, you mean," he corrected, "yet I suspect that she places the blame where it really belongs. By the way, I saw the dear Doctor out in the foyer this evening, chatting amiably with the beautiful Mrs. Delancey. No doubt the two were concocting some delicious story for millions of gaping *canaille* to read and believe!"

"I am weary of that man!" Mrs. R.-S. sighed, and her eyes grew determined. "If he dares to refer to Carol again, I *shall* intercede with the Bishop!"

"And spoil the publicity I couldn't hope to purchase at any price?" Stratini held up his hands. "But listen!"

Salvo after salvo of applause fairly shook the building and shouts of "*Bravo!*" thundered through pandemonium. For a moment they were silent, and then Stratini slowly lit a fresh cigarette.

"Apparently they liked her," he observed with a quizzical smile, and consulted his watch. "That was the last call after the final curtain. Her *début* is history now. . . ."

"A chapter of which you may be proud!" Mrs. R.-S. said loyally, and he would have taken her hand,

but the door was thrown suddenly open and Carol burst radiantly into the room.

"You said I'd do it . . . and I did!" she cried as her eyes glittered, and with a gay little laugh, hurled an armful of flowers at the impresario's feet.

"Oh, Stratti!" she went on excitedly, "I've never known such an evening . . . never known I *could* let myself go like that. When I first stared out into the blackness, and a thousand eyes blazed at me, I wanted to run away . . . all those glasses trained on me, made me feel actually naked . . . and I seemed to feel the hot flush sweep over my bare flesh! I imagined myself stripped of everything . . . poise, pride, presence of mind . . . every vestige of self-respect . . . and I knew in an instant how Magdalen felt when they wanted to stone her!"

"What perfect bliss!" sighed Stratini, "to *feel* a rôle like that! But instead of hurling stones, they pelted you with bouquets. My dear, I'm delighted with you!"

"We all are!" Mrs. R.-S. caught her hand and pressed it eagerly. "The others are coming too . . . to tell you how splendid you were!"

"I wish they wouldn't," Carol drew back in alarm, "somehow I don't feel . . . like seeing people to-night."

"Your days of being a shrinking violet are faded and gone," Stratini shook his finger at her wagishly. "You no longer belong to yourself. . . ."

"You're always telling me that!" Carol flared at him.

"Tch!" he clicked his tongue. "No temper, if you please! It is not to *us* that you owe allegiance now, but to that dear public we all hate so cordially, and yet must strive to please unceasingly. The guarantors wish to look at you . . . the critics clamor to kiss your hand, and if you refuse they will damn you . . . tell their readers you stuff yourself with

corned beef and talk like an ignorant fishwife! Millionaires will wonder what limousines you prefer; and my countryman who sweeps the street will brand me as a traitor because you were not born in Naples or in Milan. And there you are!"

"But Stratti," she pleaded like a child, "am I never in all my life . . . going to be able to do as I please?"

"That will depend entirely upon what you wish to do," he informed her smilingly. "Some actresses do *quite* as they please, and in doing so, please the public . . . for a time . . . but untainted popularity is a greater asset for a singer than temporary notoriety. . . ."

"Stratti, please!" she broke in as though unable to hear him out, "is it necessary to test me again?"

"Forgive me!" he repented sincerely. "To-night, I have asked a few really worth while people to have supper with us in the greenroom. It will be an ordeal, perhaps, but really, my child, you *must* know them."

"You are too kind!" she put both her hands on his shoulders, "but I can't help wondering, Stratti, whether the flowers and the applause are worth what they cost . . . whether any height I may attain is worth while after all! Oh, I know I should be elated . . . eternally thankful to you . . . and I should be supremely happy . . . and glad and gay! . . . but, honestly, Stratti, dear . . . I don't know whether to laugh . . . or cry!"

"But you *will*!" Mrs. R.-S. assured her tenderly. "It's only natural to feel that way after the strain. . . ."

"Enough!" Stratini bellowed, not at all liking the turn her thoughts were taking. "I will have neither nerves nor temperament . . . you are not great enough . . . yet! I have *made* you . . . in an absurdly short time . . . and I will not let you *unmake*

yourself . . . in less! If you imagine you have nerves . . . get rid of them!"

Carol threw back her head and half-closed her eyes . . . then with a little effort, she opened them again to smile at him. "Please don't think I'm ungrateful . . . I couldn't be . . . to-night of all nights! And I haven't forgotten my promise to pay you . . . with a kiss?"

"*Imbecile!*" he shieked at her. "Why offer to settle a debt when we are not alone? Eleanore, did you ever hear of such a distracting creature?"

Mrs. R.-S. laughed, but Carol shook her head and looked at them helplessly. "You two understand, of course, but I wonder what those who applauded me will think about . . . your reward?"

"What matter?" Stratini exclaimed, out of patience. "If they think at all they will make a mistake. Why in ten thousand devils do you women concern yourselves so much with what people *think* of you?"

"You've just said that I must," Carol reminded him. "You say I must cater to those who come to hear me sing, must preen myself for the public, and let them stare at me to their hearts' content. I must be gay when they are glad, and sigh when they are sad . . . that what they wish is my first concern . . . and what *I* wish . . . my last!"

"I think you had better give me my kiss," he said with twinkling eyes. "In a moment more you're sure to repent . . . because Eleanore will not like it. Besides, after the way you sang to-night, *you* deserve a kiss from *me!*"

The contagion of his teasing turned Carol to a lighter mood, and with hand on her hip, she offered her lips . . . tantalizingly. Her eyes suggested the warmth which might melt her coldness, and reminded him of her scene with Delatour; but he laughingly

ignored her play and caught her roughly in a giant grasp.

Mrs. R.-S. turned away with pretended pique, but inwardly admiring Stratini's resourceful method of diverting the girl. Then the door flew open precipitously, and Gramercy Bleeker and Aline halted on the threshold.

"Why you old *roué*!" exclaimed the pert, diaphanous creature who danced into the office. "The idea of your man-petting Carol right in front of Mummy!"

Then, as his pupil eluded him, her cheeks aflame beneath their layers of make-up and powder, Aline threw her arms about Carol and absurdly bade Stratini cease his caresses.

"You perfect darling!" she enthused as she stepped back to better view her close-up of *Carmen*. "I never knew it was in you to be so alluringly awful!"

"Was I, dear?" Carol asked, her manner suddenly timid, and she hastily glanced from Bleeker to the open door. But in the group which stared in at them from a discreet distance, she again failed to find the man she was seeking . . . and her sigh was either one of relief or of disappointment. Stratini was not quite certain which, but he sensed a depression of spirit which would interfere with his plans if he could not correct it promptly.

"Do not hurry in changing," he switched the subject, as he urged Carol to go to her dressing-room. "Rest for a little, and when you are fresh once more, come to us in the greenroom."

Aline wished to go with her, but Stratini vetoed her plan, and he carefully closed the office door when Carol had swept across the dismantled stage to give herself into the hands of her waiting attendant.

"I thought she was going to break down," Mrs. R.-S. sympathized with perfect understanding. "Of course, she expected Whitney, and it makes me simply furious that he is not here!"

"Perhaps he felt a certain delicacy in appearing at such a moment," Stratini suggested. "He may have felt out of place in such a picture. . . ."

"But I telephoned to his office only this afternoon," Mrs. R.-S. informed him, "to tell him not to forget the documents we will need. . . ."

"Everything is here," Stratini announced, and with the gesture of a magician, he snatched a silken scarf from a table beside his desk. On a velvet cushion rested an ivory casket of unique carving, an exquisite antique which made Aline exclaim with surprised delight. "The original articles of incorporation," Stratini explained as he lifted the lid, "and here is the deed we sign to transfer the stock to Carol."

"What's the plot?" demanded Aline, "I'm not in on this little secret."

"What a pity!" Stratini mocked her. . . . "We didn't wish Carol to know it. Your mother suggests that the present board of directors withdraw from financial interest in Carol, Incorporated . . . that we transfer our holdings to Carol and cancel her notes to us . . . as a sort of *début* present."

"How perfectly splendid!" Aline clapped her hands.

"The only question in my mind," Mrs. R.-S. interjected, "is whether or not she'll accept the stock as a gift from us."

"How can she decline if *you* offer it?" Stratini asked. "At best this little matter of business is only a make-believe and a subterfuge . . . a concession to Mrs. Grundy, and a shield which proved ineffective against the darts of Estelle Delancey."

"I could slap that minx!" exclaimed Mrs. R.-S., but Stratini only chuckled.

"Let's try to think of pleasant things," he suggested. "Whitney has already signed, leaving a vacant line for you to head the list." And he passed a pen to Mrs. R.-S. as she seated herself at his desk.

VIII.

"VOILA!" Stratini added his own signature with a foreign flourish. "We are ready for the finale of our little experiment. As soon as Carol comes we will tell her, before we join the others and must share her with our guests."

He folded the blue-backed sheet and replaced it in the casket, re-covering the ivory treasure with its silken scarf. "And now, while we wait, suppose we sip a silent toast to our venture's splendid conclusion?"

A knock at the door punctuated his suggestion, and with a gesture, he requested Bleeker to answer it. His frown boded ill for undesired interruption, yet his guarded manner suggested curious anticipation as he opened a music cabinet which served as a cellarette.

"Well, I'll be . . . I mean, good evening!" Bleeker burst out in annoyed amazement, and Stratini glanced quickly around as he fondled a cobwebbed bottle with cautious hands. For a moment Aline was speechless, but Mrs. R.-S. merely leveled her lorgnon in the direction of the intruder, and then deliberately turned her back upon the open door.

Framed in the entrance stood the Rector, apparently surprised at the sight of Stratini's companions, and somewhat abashed at the frigid attitude of Mrs. Rhinebeck-Sturdevant. Yet he summoned what calm he might, and mustered his dignity as he nodded coldly to Bleeker and stepped inside.

"I am sorry to disturb this gathering," he began with an effort to make his voice impressive, "but the good soldier naturally goes where his cause calls. . . ."

"A martyr to duty, as it were!" Stratini commented sarcastically, holding up the dusty bottle to

see its label more clearly. "Shut the door, Gram, and ask the Doctor to join us. . . . Will you reach me the glasses?"

The Rector assumed his most austere pose and addressed himself to Stratini, endeavoring as best he might, to ignore the others . . . and not succeeding to any marked degree. "I did not come here to toast this woman, but to denounce her!" he hurled at the impresario, and, holding his head high, glared witheringly at Bleeker.

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the tapping of Mrs. R.-S.'s rings on Stratini's desk top, but Doctor Duane went on with an effort to seem oblivious of her presence.

"When men and women of your standing in the community countenance a performance such as we have just witnessed, it is high time the clergy called *someone* to account!" he snapped. "The audience itself was bad enough in its lack of dress and decorum . . . filling the lounge rooms with cigarette smoke and the odors of pocket flasks. . . ."

"I do not dictate the manners and customs of the patrons of this opera house!" Stratini cut in impatiently. "I assume the police were satisfied or they would have intervened . . . and possibly have arrested these outrageous ladies!"

"I am not referring to your guests," the Rector explained, and Aline pretended to read the inscription on a picture in the corner, "but I do wish to remind you that you *do* dictate the policies which govern your singers. You have just permitted the most scandalous spectacle ever perpetrated on a New York public . . ."

"I heard the howls of horror," Stratini broke in again, as he searched in the drawer of his desk for a corkscrew. "Judging from the noise, the shock must have been terrific!"

"I did not imagine that the authorities would

countenance such licentiousness on any stage!" the violent cleric went on without deigning to comment upon Stratini's remark. "In the poor, abused name of art, you exhibit a less than half-clad courtesan whose every sensuous movement . . ."

"Enough!" Stratini stepped toward him. "You are in my office, in the presence of my friends, and you are speaking of my pupil. You will choose your words more carefully or I may so far forget myself as to assist you to the door."

"Are you attempting to intimidate me!" challenged the Rector, puffing himself like an irate pouter pigeon.

"I am merely warning you that you seem to forget yourself," Stratini said quietly.

"What I have seen this evening, I shall *never* forget!" the little man lifted his eyes to the ceiling. Then, facing the impresario, he pointed his finger accusingly into his face. "I formally protest against further presentation of this vile opera, and against the appearance of this disgraceful woman! If you defy me, I shall summon the aid of the Vice Association and appeal to the Commissioner of Police! In my opinion, sir . . ."

"*Your* opinion!" Stratini exclaimed in disgust. "You appear to overlook the opinion of some two thousand cultured men and women who sat in the audience and hailed this 'disgraceful woman' as an *artiste* beyond compare and the greatest singer of her age! I suppose what *they* think does not matter? Not since Paris was in the crinoline stage, has *Carmen* shocked the prudes?"

"The counsel of the wicked shall not prevail!" the Rector intoned piously.

"Yet fools rush in where angels fear to tread!" Stratini quoted in answer. "Did it ever occur to you, Doctor Duane, that you make yourself ridiculous with your ranting?"

"How can you glory in such indecency?" the Rec-

tor demanded, flustered and all too conscious of the impudent wink Bleeker exchanged with Aline.

"Just a moment," Stratini requested silence, and took up the ringing telephone. "*Si*, this is Signor Stratini . . . my dear sir, I am overwhelmed. . . . *Si!* . . . *Si!* . . . I could not have asked more . . . and it is not given to every impresario to discover so great a star! . . . Indeed yes . . . she is at my elbow, and I shall be charmed to give her your compliments. . . . A thousand thanks, my dear Bishop!"

Doctor Duane gasped, and Stratini chortled with glee as he hung up the instrument. "He is in Philadelphia, and was eager to know how our Songbird did. . . ."

"Incredible!" doubted the Rector.

"Call him up!" Stratini indicated the telephone. "I believe he is attending a meeting in the Diocese House . . . you know the number perhaps?"

"It would not change my attitude," the Rector declined. "That you are all in league against me, does not lessen my zeal. Your open approval of such flagrancy wounds me, but it does not deter me from my duty. My course is not changed even by the fact that my own nephew wishes actually to marry this actress. . . ."

"I suppose you would wink at his amour if his intent was less legal!" Stratini sneered at him.

Exasperated, the Rector could not find words to answer as his cheeks turned crimson. Then before he could recover himself, Carol came smiling into the room, quite changed in her stunning evening gown, and paused as she stared incredulously at the almost apoplectic distortion of the minister's vision. He seemed about to cry out, but no sound came from him as he apparently recognized in her features something long forgotten, and shrank away from Carol as she stepped slowly toward him.

"Who is this man?" she demanded with growing

emotion, and her eyes searched the group for an answer.

"Haven't you met Doctor Duane?" Mrs. R.-S. recalled that Carol had not.

"Once!" Carol said very slowly fixing her gaze on the mortified man who vainly sought to control his desperate confusion. Then with a note of scathing accusation, she pilloried him with her question . . . "*So it was you who sent me to jail? . . . you . . . you hypocrite!*"

Unable to believe her ears, Mrs. R.-S. looked from Carol to Doctor Duane, and slowly her lip curled as she saw him crumple before the girl he had come to denounce.

"So you are here again to lie about me!" Carol's voice was horrible in its bitter modulation, yet her slender frame trembled with the intensity of her tortured fury. "This is the man," she pointed at him with outraged scorn, "who charged me with the crime for which his Master forgave the Magdalen!"

"Carol!" Mrs. R.-S. stepped to her side. "Surely you cannot mean . . . ?"

"Oh, *can't* I?" Carol put out her hand and squarely faced the Rector. "I wonder if you've even the slightest conception of the hell to which you damned me with your untrue testimony, when you appeared against me in the police court that night! But of course, you *couldn't* have, and I don't suppose you'll ever know that shame and sorrow I've suffered since yet let them take me away in that awful patrol!"

Her muscles grew rigid, her eyes wild, and she leaned forward as she went on with her astounding recital. . . . "Oh, I'll never forget them . . . the jeering, curious crowd . . . the insults and the brutal laughs of the big policemen . . . then the jail where unjust confinement burned a lasting brand on the soul of the girl you know damned well did not agree to what you said you asked her to do!"

Her rising tone was almost a shriek as she confronted him with mounting, tormented passion, and the utterly dumfounded man sought to shield himself with a shrug of amazed consternation.

"You *do* seem to be a great actress!" he sniffed with grudging contempt, "but the story you tell of yourself would tend to convict you of even more . . ."

"I said you lied, and you knew you lied . . . and you know you're lying now!" her fingers twitched spasmodically as her frenzy reached a crescendo . . . and then she grew calmer, as she lashed him with her logic and put him on the defensive. "It was only your word against mine, but of course, the magistrate on the bench believed you instead of me. . . ."

"I have *wondered* what became of Mary Drew!" the Rector nodded sagely, "and it is most fortunate that I may inform your sponsors . . ."

"Of *what*?" Stratini silenced him with an imperative gesture. "I knew this Mary Drew . . . she is *dead*. . . ."

"She cannot be!" the Rector protested, "I tell you . . ."

"I say I attended her funeral!" Stratini thundered. "If *I* am not telling the truth . . . then perhaps *you* are mistaken."

"No, he *isn't* mistaken!" Carol contradicted, indignantly declining the alibi Stratini offered her. "Until this moment, I have never known the name of the man who accused me of the only thing in the world that matters to me. He wasn't dressed like this when I saw him before . . . and his actions never suggested to me that he might be a minister."

"They hardly would . . . even now!" the impresario commented, and the Rector frowned resentfully.

"I hardly knew what was happening!" Carol appealed frantically to Mrs. R.-S., fighting with all that was in her for justification. "I've tried so hard to forget it all, but now that I see him again, I want to

make him *know* what he's done to me . . . want him to pay as I've paid . . . not only for what he said that night, but for what he has hinted since . . . and I'm going to make him deny every word he's uttered!"

"Surely you cannot condemn me now . . . when she admits her guilt?" the Rector hastily sought Mrs. R.-S.'s support. "When I came to this room to protest about her performance, I had no idea that this creature was once a woman . . ."

"*I think I'll kill you if you say that!*" Carol's tone was coldly tense, and even Stratini shuddered at the light which lurked in her eyes, at the clenching of her fingers, which seemed to long to clutch at the Rector's throat . . . to tear his very bulging eyes from their sockets. Then, from sheer exhaustion, she sank into a chair and her shoulders shook with emotion as she sobbed hysterically.

No one moved . . . no one ventured a comment . . . and Doctor Duane swallowed with mortification as he realized the ostracism meted out to him. Then, in seeking to save himself, he assumed an injured air, and once more his supplication was made to Mrs. R.-S., who was bending over Carol with tender compassion.

"Whatever you may have thought of my attitude before," his voice broke gratingly on their ears, "you as a mother must sympathize . . ."

"My sympathies are evident, I think," Mrs. R.-S. looked up, and the Rector recoiled from the disdain in her eyes.

"But think of your daughter . . . of my nephew . . ." he tried to bolster his cause.

"What *about* your nephew?" Carol sprang to her feet. "He means nothing to me! The only thing that matters is the lie you've told . . . and I wouldn't marry a man of your breed if he crawled to me on his knees! You've stolen something more precious to me than all the men in the world . . . and before you

leave this room, you're going to give it back! Do you hear what I say!"

"It is not within my power . . . to absolve sin," Doctor Duane turned away.

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Carol fervently, "but you're going to stay here and listen while I tell them my story. . . ."

"Oh, come!" Stratini wished to persuade her. "We all believe in you . . . why bother to answer him?"

"I think, perhaps," said Mrs. R.-S., "Carol would rather go on . . . and no doubt, what she has to say will be interesting to the Rector."

Carol gave her a grateful look and controlled herself with an effort; then in a tone that was little above a whisper, she began to supplement what they knew of her.

"I went to that dingy restaurant because I thought it was cheap, and it wasn't until this man came and sat at my table, that I suspected the sort of place I'd drifted into. I'd noticed the dancing and drinking, of course, but all I wanted was food . . . a little time to think what I ought to do . . . although I was more than lonely enough to have welcomed company. . . ."

"So it seemed," the Rector commented dryly, vainly searching for ground on which to entrench himself. "I went to this resort in the course of my investigations. . . ."

"Let her tell her story!" Stratini pounded his desk.

"Am I being judged, sir?" came the haughty protest.

"A woman is being given the opportunity to vindicate herself," Mrs. R.-S. observed. "You surely will not wish to deny her *that* right?"

"He came to my table," Carol went on, before the Rector could answer, "he and another man. There were no other places and they asked if they might sit down. I agreed, and he started to question me . . . learned I had been in Paris . . . that I was back, unsuccessful, seeking a place in the chorus . . . looking

for work that would pay me enough to live. . . . Then they ordered drinks . . . and insisted that I have one . . . and the man with him said that he had an apartment up-town. I wanted to get away, but I didn't know what to do . . . and then, before I could say a word, the place was full of police!"

She hung her head as though overcome by the recollection, and Doctor Duane fidgeted and edged his way to the door, against which Bleeker was leaning, with his lanky form barring the exit. There followed a pause which the Rector found awkward, Carol looked up at him with grim determination.

"An Inspector began to question me, but this man wouldn't let me answer . . . " and then she stood up, and her burning eyes glittered like those of a tigress.

. . . "He said," she began, and suddenly stopped, as her whole body quivered with suppressed loathing and hatred. . . . *"Tell them what you said . . . if you're coward enough to repeat it!"*

"What would one naturally do?" the Rector evaded. "The place was a den. . . ."

"We are not discussing the *place!*" Stratini reminded him.

"You see!" Carol cried out with a pitiful laugh, "He knows it wasn't true and he won't say it again! But I hadn't a chance . . . with no one to vouch for me . . . and they herded me in with other girls who were crying and kicking and screaming. One of them seemed to understand what had happened to me, and whispered not to tell the police my own name. I couldn't have done that anyway . . . I was too dazed and ashamed . . . and I knew I could never go back to the boarding house I'd left! Then for the next thirty days, I descended into hell . . . and when I came out I didn't want to live any more. Oh, it wasn't being in prison . . . it wasn't the hard work I'd done . . . but what my being sent there for made everyone think of me!"

"But you forget," Stratini soothed, putting his hand

on her shoulder, "we tore that chapter out of the book . . . and burned the pages, together."

"I'd *like* to forget . . . but I can't!" she turned to him with a smile that was brimming with sorrow, "and even now I wish . . . I'd drowned myself instead of singing outside your window!"

"Carol!" Mrs. R.-S. caught her in her arms, "you couldn't have done that, dear . . . because you had done no wrong . . . so God sent you to *me*!"

"Then you *believe* me!" Carol's eyes lighted in ecstasy.

"Need I answer that?" Mrs. R.-S. asked her gently. "You've merely been condemned on circumstantial evidence, by a man whose mistaken zeal must have driven him insane . . . and that man presumes to interpret Christianity to his erring parishioners!"

"Finding a girl in such an environment made my apparent error natural," the Rector hastened to say, and then, as though wiping the slate, he added, "I'm sorry. . . ."

"Does being sorry help?" Carol flashed at him. "Does that help me to hold up my head and not be ashamed? . . . not that I've done anything I want to hide . . . but because it's almost impossible for a woman to prove herself innocent . . . even though she *has* been accused without reason!"

"Why didn't you come to me?" Mrs. R.-S. reproached her. "You shouldn't have suffered in silence."

"I wish I had . . . but then, when I was about to . . . it seemed as though you'd think me a thief as well as something worse!" Carol confessed brokenly. "And what could I do to prove my case? Literally nothing. The things *he* persisted in saying . . . about the stage and of me, and of Stratti . . . only made matters worse . . . especially when he thought I wanted to marry Whitney. . . ."

"You mean, my dear," Mrs. R.-S. intervened with

deliberate inflection, "*when Whitney wished to marry you.*"

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Carol abandoned all reserve, "I've had enough of Duanes for the rest of my life!" And she looked toward the Rector with incredible disillusionment. "I've always thought that ministers worked to make us happy and good, but this one seems to delight in throwing mud at us. Instead of showing us how beautiful things can be, he tears down our reputations and makes us believe there's nothing but evil in life. . . ."

"Is the creature mad?" gasped the affronted dominie.

"Mad!" she shrilled. "Yes, I *must* be mad! And since you're convinced that I must be bad, I'll show you that I *am*! Why, you haven't any idea how vile a woman can be . . . but if that's all you expect to find in the world . . . all you wish to point out . . . follow me and I'll show you the shortest road to hell!"

"*Voila!*" Stratini chuckled. "My case is proved . . . assert a fallacy often enough and it becomes a fact!"

"As for your precious nephew!" Carol continued as though aware of the others' presence, "you needn't have any fear that I'll contaminate *him*. Do you think I'd mix my red blood with the icy vinegar that runs in the veins of such pious prigs as you Duanes!"

"Carol!" a hurt protest came from the doorway, and looking up in quick surprise, she saw Whitney in the corridor. His expression was one of unspeakable disappointment, and Carol knew that he must have heard her outburst. Then, in a twinkling, her attitude changed as she sensed the unpleasant significance of the little group behind him.

IX.

"How fortunate that you have come in time!" the Rector breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of his nephew. "Now you have heard from her own lips what type of woman she is."

Whitney nodded gravely. "I have known for a long time," he said, and then fell silent as he stepped aside for Estelle Delancey to enter the room. Following her came the former Rhinebeck-Sturdevant butler, and the spectacled detective Carol had not seen since the time of Judson's arrest at Clifcleft. His presence puzzled the Rector and aroused Carol's ire, for she scented humiliation in being confronted by him, and sensed that this new indignity had been devised by Whitney.

Estelle avoided her challenging glance and seemed to shrink from Mrs. R.-S.'s scrutiny; but there was no mistaking the detective's satisfaction, no uncertainty in his evident knowledge concerning Carol.

"At last you must see I was right," Doctor Duane took encouragement from his nephew's reply. "Yet I know too well the folly of youth, and perhaps you would not have believed me if I had repeated later what has just been said."

"In fairness to you," Whitney responded quietly, "I have had Mr. Brown look into Miss Drayton's antecedents. . . ."

Carol's eyes flashed with contempt that was reminiscent of her expression as *Carmen*. "Oh, this is delicious!" she turned with a shrug to Stratini. "Imagine such consideration for one's relatives . . . and such caution! The man asks me to be his wife, and then . . . to make sure that my vicious past will not sully his family name, he investigates my record! I hope it shocked him sufficiently . . . *do* give me a cigarette!"

Her evening gown had transformed her, and no longer she seemed like the reckless creature to whom the Rector had taken such violent exception; but now, as she leaned toward Stratini, as he held a match for her cigarette, the flash of her scorn at Whitney was more than worthy of *Carmen*. Imploringly, he held out his hands, begging her to listen, but she only shrugged and stepped away to avoid his contact.

"Tell her, Stratti!" he pleaded, wounded by her contempt, "tell her I only wished to prove that my uncle was wrong!"

"Whitney!" exclaimed the Rector with indignation, completely taken back at his nephew's statement.

"It's true!" Whitney faced him. "I couldn't believe what you said, and I knew the things of which Mrs. Delancey hinted were worse than impossible. . . ."

"It's a pity you can't trust *her*!" Carol sneered at him, "but don't let me interrupt. Finish your pretty story . . . of course, you found that your uncle was quite correct?"

"Of course I *didn't*!" Whitney included them all in the sweep of his hand. "I found it more than absurd . . . just as you know I must have, . . . but I couldn't contradict then, dear . . . until I could prove the truth."

"Why bother?" asked Carol bitterly. "No one else seems to care, and I'm sure it doesn't make the slightest difference to me."

"You don't mean that!" he charged her earnestly. "You know that you do care and that I do, too. If Stratti hadn't let Judson go, I'd have had the story sooner, but now Brown knows all that happened, and Judson and Mrs. Delancey are here to confirm his statements."

"Whitney," said Mrs. R.-S., a little impatiently, "isn't all this just a little absurd? Isn't my acceptance of Carol quite sufficient for you . . . even if your

own love for her doesn't make such dramatics entirely unnecessary?"

"No!" he answered sharply. "When I explain, I think you'll agree that it's time to tear away the network of lies that have been woven about her. You've all advised her to forget the charges made against her, but why *should* she submit to being suspected of several things that she didn't even do?"

"We have accepted that as a matter of course," Mrs. R.-S. reminded him.

"I realize that," he bowed, as Carol watched him curiously through the cloud of smoke she blew to veil her face, "but nevertheless, the injustice of it all has rankled within me, and I've felt that Carol would be happier if she were unequivocally vindicated."

"Perhaps," Mrs. R.-S. admitted, "although she has never needed to be . . . with me."

"Yet even you will be happy to know what Brown has learned," Whitney insisted, "and if Carol doesn't mind I'm going to tell you. . . ."

"Nothing a Duane could say could possibly offend me," Carol answered sarcastically, not yet quite prepared to unmask her innermost feeling, although she was hardly able to restrain her impulse to throw herself into Whitney's arms and beg him to forgive her. For it seemed now that *she* had wronged him and that, misunderstanding his motives, she had caused herself as well as him, unnecessary suffering. Yet her pride and her natural resentment, and the ache which had not passed, forbade her to give in as yet, before her churchly accuser.

"I'm sorry, Carol," Whitney began, with tender understanding, and winced at the lash of her eyes as she answered. . . .

"Being sorry seems a family trait that you share with the Rector!"

But Whitney turned to the others and drew from his pocket the sworn report given him by the detective.

"Brown has traced your history back to the time when you lived with your Aunt in Nevada, before you went abroad . . . and he knows every move you've made since you returned to New York. It is all in this report, dear, and if any man in the world can testify against you with first hand knowledge . . . that man is my reverend uncle!"

The only sound in the office came from Estelle Delancey, who softly began to sob as her overwrought nerves gave way. Carol looked at her wonderingly, then let her eyes meet Whitney's, trying to fully comprehend what she had heard him say.

"You really mean that?" she found words at last. "You really *believe* it, Whitney?"

"I *know* it!" he said with emotion, and stepped closer without any fear of her shunning him now. "There never *was* the slightest breath of scandal about anything you did, until the night my uncle caused your arrest. . . ."

"Whitney!" exclaimed the indignant Rector, "what are you insinuating . . . is it possible that you doubt my integrity?"

"*Your* integrity!" laughed Carol, facing him furiously. "Is it any more unassailable than mine? Since Whitney has made this search and has not found me wanting, suppose you tell them why you told the police what you did! There isn't a blemish in all of my record . . . except the one *you* put there . . . and since you say you know what you know . . . suppose you tell them *how*."

Quickly she crossed the rug and confronted the agitated man like some avenging angel. And her words fell upon his stupefied ears like an edict of nemesis, calling on him to admit his own guilt or else pronounce her guiltless.

"I tell you," she said dramatically, in a tone that was scarcely more than a whisper in spite of its tenseness, "that I have never been to you or to any other

man . . . the scarlet woman you swore on your oath that I was. And now that we're both in a court where my word counts as well as yours, you'll either admit what I say is so . . . or else tell these people that *you* are the man who took from me the right to call myself good!"

Utterly confounded, almost unable to speak, he stared at her helplessly while those about him looked on in silence; and Carol waited a moment to give him time to reply.

"Are you willing to say *that* too?" she put to him so bluntly that any equivocation was made impossible.

Palsied with nervousness, he shrank away from her with a gesture of all-consuming horror, appealing in vain to the others with furtive glances, and utterly unable to look into Carol's eyes. "N-Naturally not!" he cried, horrified. "There seems to be some mistake . . . I could not, of course, go so far as to say. . . ."

"Then admit that you spoke without knowledge . . . without a vestige of proof!" she demanded imperiously. "Admit that you were either deceived . . . or else, that you *lied*!"

"I was wrong," the Rector shook his head slowly, after a little pause, in which his manner seemed to undergo an amazing change; but he could not quite be rid of his pompous, egotistic pose of self-righteousness. "If I have been in error, I scourge and chastise myself. . . . I am forced to heap reproaches upon my own unfortunate head . . . and I gladly retract the words my mistake caused me to utter . . . yet even you can hardly blame me. . . ."

"You heard him!" Carol called out in a frenzy of delight. "All of you heard what he said . . . and *You*, dear God, heard him too!"

With clasped hands, she stood with her eyes looking upward, her lips moving soundlessly in a prayer of joyous gratitude. Then, she went quickly to Estelle Delancey's side and put her arms about her. "I want

to thank you," she said to her softly, "and I want you to realize that *I* know what you're suffering now. . . ."

"*Can* you know, when *you* did no wrong?" Estelle raised her tear-stained face to Carol. "It's different with me, because . . . I think . . . I *wanted* to be plain bad. . . ."

"No, you didn't," Carol regained her poise as she tried to comfort Estelle. "None of us really want to be . . . we only *think* we do . . . and no matter what we tell ourselves, it hurts when others believe us to be *what we are not*. We've both learned a bitter lesson, perhaps in a different way . . . Stratti taught you yours in his worldly wisdom . . . while mine came from bigotry . . . from narrowness that will vanish when all of us fully understand that hurting one another is honestly never worth while."

Carol's voice trailed off into a whisper. "And yet," she thought aloud, "I've found myself through suffering. I've become acquainted with my own soul . . . something that I thought was wanting in me . . . that I lacked. Doctor Duane is to be congratulated."

The Rector hung his head, but Whitney, unrelenting, ignored his uncle's embarrassed, broken demeanor. "Carol, dear," he caught her hand, "I've asked the Bishop to marry us . . . are you willing?"

"What a ripping idea!" Aline exclaimed, dancing with delight, "we can have a *triple* wedding . . . Carol and you, and Gram and me . . . and Mummy and her old bear!"

"Not a bad thought," chuckled Stratini meditatively, "but—now that I've beaten the Rector at his own game—I feel maliciously generous . . . so much so that I think we might ask him to tie the knots for us."

Doctor Duane gazed at Stratini in dawning wonderment. With an effort he turned from him to face Carol, for he sensed that she must give the answer for the others as well as for herself.

The suggestion that his uncle should marry them momentarily stunned Whitney. The magnanimity of the thought touched something deep in him, and, as he raised his eyes to Carol's, she read their mute appeal.

"No, dear," she murmured softly to him, "do not make me answer to-night. I can't forget that but a moment ago I was unfairly accused . . . begging, almost in vain, for belief and forgiveness. Your uncle has admitted his mistake. . . . It is enough—I forgive him. I think we should *extend* as freely as we *ask* forgiveness. But wait, Whitney . . . please. . . ."

That she held out even such a promise, indefinite though it was, of asking him to officiate at her marriage to Whitney completely overwhelmed Doctor Duane.

"You have voiced a beautiful thought," said he, emotion choking him. ". . . To forgive, and to be forgiven! . . . I—I shouldn't wonder but what you're a better Christian than I am."

Whitney could only stare at his uncle, so sincere was the man's humility . . . so unlike the frigid self-righteousness with which he had always clothed himself. Carol's attitude moved him to new admiration of her, and his voice trembled as he held out both hands and said:

"Carol, dear, . . . you are truly great! Do not answer to-night. I will wait—a week—a month if you like. I have waited so long already, that a few days more can't matter."

Carol closed her eyes, but her smile was answer enough.

THE END





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